



# JEEVADHARA

## **DALIT CHRISTIANS: HAS ANYTHING CHANGED?**

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Edited by

Felix Wilfred

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# jeevadhara

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## Dalit Christians: Has Anything Changed?

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## Editorial

In recent weeks, the secret conversations of the dons of the corporate world, the politicians and the middlemen (and middlewomen too) were brought out in the open to the general public. One of the things it revealed is who really governs India and where the treasures and hearts of the elites in the country are. These conversations disclose power-plays inspired by selfish goals and manipulations made for favours, positions and wealth. This underworld of India has nothing to offer to the poor and the marginalized who continue to be taken for a ride by the powerful political and corporate lobby. What is left for the millions below poverty line in this country are but some crumbs from the tables of these glorified thieves – what else shall we call them - who swindle public resources for private gains, and abuse public offices.

The most marginalized group in this country are the Dalits along with the tribals. They count only for election and votes; for the rest, they are of no significance for those in power. With liberal capitalism pushing ahead, the Dalit agenda is being pushed back and it is sliding into the abyss of oblivion. Among the Dalits, the group suffers most are the Dalit Christians – experiencing exclusion from the state-privileges to other Dalits. They have suffered and continue to suffer discrimination and exclusion in the Church communities. The present issue of *Jeevadhara* intends to highlight the plight of Dalit Christians and bring to the consciousness of the nation, of the Church, its leaders, clergy, religious and upper caste Christians the need for a radical change in attitude and practices and institutions.

Most of the articles presented here go back to a conference organized by Asian Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies on the theme

“Reimaging the Relationship between Christianity and Dalit Liberation”. This conference organized jointly with Indian Society for Promotion of Christian Knowledge (ISPCK) on the occasion of its tercentenary was held at the Asian Centre for Cross Cultural Studies, Chennai, during 10<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup> September, 2010. It brought together some of the outstanding representatives of Dalit Christian cause. *Jeevadhara* through this special issue wants to make known widely to the general public the results of this conference with the hope that it will help generate deeper commitment in the society and in the Church to the cause of Dalit Christians.

The contribution of S. Lourdusamy provides a critical overview of the way the Church has been dealing with the issue of Dalit Christians, while that of Cosmon provides a historical interpretation of Dalit Christian struggles from early twentieth century on. The article of Francis Xavier is a presentation of the kinds of humiliation Dalits go through in the Church-communities, and especially among the clergy and the religious. It also provides some pointers to overcome this plight in the future. Bama takes up the issue of Dalit women and analyzes their condition, and also provides a lot of insights on how they could come out of their victimhood to affirm their agency. These reflections are deepened through two Biblical studies – the one by Maria Arul Raja and the other by John Baptist. Maria Arul Raja shows how the Dalit hermeneutics draws on the cultural and symbolic universe of the Dalits and how this could encounter the Biblical world and the potential for liberative praxis this involves. John Baptist studies the Biblical figure of the slave woman Hagar and brings her plight in conversation with that of Dalit women, highlighting in both cases the agency of the victim. My contribution contends that Dalit Christians are not simply object of Church’s involvement, but they themselves are contributing to the Church more than what they receive. In this vein it reflects on what the so-called “upper caste” Christians could learn from Dalit Christians. A special feature of this issue is the exclusive interview with Archbishop Chinnappa of Madras-Mylapore. He shares his views and hopes regarding Dalit Christians in the country, and on the attitude of the hierarchy, clergy, religious and the people.

I am very grateful to all the authors of this issue for their rich and insightful contributions. In a special way I wish to express my thanks and warm appreciation to Flora for helping me with the organization of the conference on Dalit Christians and also in editing and getting ready the manuscripts for publication in *Jeevadhara*. My doctoral student Kochurani lent a helping hand in finalizing the manuscripts for which I thank her sincerely.

I hope the modest contribution through this number of *Jeevadhara* will trigger greater interest and commitment in the society and in the Church for the struggles of Dalit Christians for their dignity, self-respect and for their rights.

### **Felix Wilfred**

Director, Asian Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies, &  
Professor, ICCR Chair, University of Dublin, Ireland



## **Dalit Christians: Has Anything Changed?**

**S. Lourdusamy**

The author is a former secretary, SC/ST Commission of CBCI. In this article drawing from his experiences with Church leaders and politicians, the author leads us to see from a close range the difficulties and struggles the Dalit Christians are going through, and in the process shows the ignorance and lethargy of Church-leaders and the Christian communities regarding this vital issue. The presentation is down to earth and full of insights. He shows the divide between high-sounding declarations in favour of Dalit Christians and actual practice.

The past twenty-five years of my life has been a struggle all along for equal rights for the Dalit Christians. It has been a struggle with the government and with the Church. I myself am a Dalit, and I have undergone all kinds of oppression from my childhood, during my studies for priesthood, and even after that during the years of my ministry. I thought it is important to premise this note so that the reader may be able to follow my reflections springing from ground-realities.

One may ask whether there has been any change in the relationship of the Church to Dalit Liberation? But my question is more basic one: Has there been really any relationship at all? I see a lot of conflicts between hierarchy and laity and upper caste Christians and Dalit

Christians and upper caste people and Dalit people. Polarization and hatred seem to fill the horizons.

As the secretary of the SC/ST Commission of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), I conducted a study on the polarization between hierarchy and Dalits, because the Dalit Christians came together and formed a movement called "Dalit Christians Liberation Movement" and they were fighting against the oppression by upper caste people especially by the hierarchy. The Dalits had a long list of demands. At the practical level, I made a number of attempts to bring together Dalit Christian movement and the leaders of Dalit and the hierarchy, clergy and the religious. I must confess that I have not been successful even today, because of hatred between the groups. What I intend to do in this article is to reflect on the present state of conflict of interest between the Church and the Dalit struggles.

### **Do Dalits Divide the Church?**

Let me begin with an incident. One of the learned bishops of Tamilnadu was talking to me some months ago, and said, "This SC/ST commission should be abolished". He is highly qualified in the field of sociology and has held high position in CBCI and led so many movements. He has also been an activist. That is why what he said surprised me a lot. He repeated that the SC/ST Commission should be abolished, a second time. I then asked him, "Why?" He said, you are perpetuating the caste in the name of SC/ST Commission. He went on to say, "You are organizing seminars for only Dalit priests which means you are dividing the Church and you go to the government and you are betraying Church and tarnishing its image of the Church in India. You go to the judiciary and file writ petition for equal rights for Dalits Christians and through the judiciary tell the whole world that there is a caste in Christianity and Dalit Christians are oppressed and kept untouchable and they are still suffering untouchability. Are you not betraying the Church?" "Moreover", he said, "class struggle is not possible as long as there is caste struggle. For a classless and egalitarian society, there is need to bring together all the classes – the oppressing and the oppressed classes; the employers and the labourers. But you try to divide people by your SC/ST Commission. How is liberation

possible without all the oppressed people across castes coming together.”

Another argument of the Bishop was that if we have a commission for the SC/ST, other castes also will demand to establish commissions for them. At this point, I told him, “Bishop, you are talking about classless society forgetting about the fact that India is a caste society; Indian social structure is based on the caste institution. I am sorry bishop that I have to tell you the simple thing that Dalit people do not have caste. They are *avarna* – casteless. We Dalits are uncontaminated by caste and not polluted by it”. I added, “If the upper castes people are organizing themselves in the name of caste, it is sinful. If, the Dalit people come together, this is a command of God through Jesus- a God who wants the solidarity and liberation of the oppressed people as a group and community. The Dalits are struggling for human dignity, equality and freedom. Is not all this what God wants for his oppressed people?”

### **Is Dalit Commission an Anathema?**

The Bishop I referred to is not alone in thinking this way. He is only an example of many such Church leaders and upper caste people who question organized activities of the marginalized Christian Dalits thinking that it is reinforcing caste and causing division. But what these Church leaders – bishops, priests, religious and other upper caste power-groups – do not realize is that there is a national commission for SC/ST, and no serious minded person thinks that by constituting such a commission caste is reinforced. The practice of reservation that is put into effect through the help of such a national commission has the intent of bringing the Dalit people to the fore, to the mainstream. The national policy is to practice reservation on the basis of the numerical strength of the Dalits. But this, unfortunately does not happen in the Church where there are a lot of leaders and others who are not even convinced of having a commission to look after the welfare of the Dalit people. What is even worse, other caste people in the Church like in Tamilnadu, have staked claim that they should have their own caste commissions in the Church to look after their welfare similar to SC/ST commission!

We the Dalit people are in a condition of humiliation, socially untouchable, economically poor, politically powerless, and educationally illiterate. This was not our original status. We were a great people and we were, as history and archeological studies show, the early dwellers and settlers in India. Because of false theory – the myth of a *purushasukta* and a philosophy of a *varna* and *varna dharma*, Dalits were thrown out and they were made no people. We are made into a faceless people. Is the Church ready to support our cause, our wellbeing?

### **Noble Declarations and Abysmal Practices**

If we go through the documents of CBCI and those of Regional Bishops Councils, after 1980, we will find very revolutionary statements against caste and the need to espouse the cause of Dalit Christians. It is strange that, while the question of Scheduled caste was a national issue since the early decades of twentieth century, the Church began to discuss it only starting from 1980's. Though the Catholic Bishop' Conference was in existence since 1944, the Dalit Christian issue came to its attention only in 1982. Until then, the Catholic Church maintained that there is no caste system in the Church, nor any discrimination. But the crux of the issue is whether the bold statements have been translated into practice. What was stated in 1982 meeting of CBCI was repeated again and again. For example the declaration of Varanasi CBCI meeting spoke in the same vein as the declaration of 1982. In spite of all this, little followed in terms of action or concrete plans for the welfare of Dalit Christians.

In Varanasi the bishops chalked out programmes and reservation in education and employment for Dalit Christians in every diocese according to the size of their population. There was also suggestion of promoting vocation among the Dalits and increase of their number in hierarchy and among clergy. It was often spoken at the official level in the Church that we should fight the state discrimination against Dalit Christians until they gain equal rights with other Dalits. It was also suggested that Dalit young men and women should be trained so that they are enabled to obtain administrative and professional jobs. How much of all these grand proposals have been translated into action?

Let me ask the question, out of 170 Catholic Bishops in the country, how many are Dalit bishops? How well are they represented in the clergy of the dioceses and among the religious? How many among the Dalits are in leadership position in the Church? If we try to answer these questions, we will see that things have not changed.

All this has created a mood of skepticism among Dalit Christians who do not believe and accept that there is going to be a change of image in the relationship. Out of 170 bishops in the country, we have less than 10 Dalit Bishops. But we need to remember that out of 24 million Christians, 16 million are from the Dalit community. This means the majority of Christians in the country hail from Dalit community.

In 1990 after taking over as the national secretary for SC/ST Commission of CBCI, I organised more than 23 mass rallies hunger-strikes, prayer and fasting sessions for the rights of Dalit Christians. Mother Teresa also participated once in one of the rallies. If the bishops are really interested in the question of Dalit Christians we would expect a good participation of them in the rallies to claim equal rights for Dalit Christians. How many bishops participated? Out of 157 at that time, there were hardly twenty of them. But then compare more than one hundred bishops who participated in a conference on evangelization in Mumbai.. They flock to a conference on evangelization. But what do they understand by it, when they cannot understand the Good News to the Poor should really mean Good News to the oppressed Dalit people? It is obviously more disturbing to involve for the cause of the Dalit Christians than the cosy option of attending a conference on evangelization where bishops are welcomed and given special treatment. This does not hurt. The leaders do not feel challenged. As for participation of the people in the rallies, 90% were Dalits. I asked myself, where are the rest of Christians – the upper castes? Where is the solidarity of the Church-community for the cause of the Dalits?

### **Political Leaders Advise Bishops**

Some years ago when I went with a delegation to meet Mr L. Advani, then Home Minister, for the extension of reservation also to Dalit Christians, he fired us. "Do not come to me again with this", he said. "You say Dalit Christians are socially and educational backward;

therefore, they should be included in the list of schedule caste. How can you say socially and educationally backward, when education is in your hands? You are Christians and how come that you criticize Hinduism for its caste, and now come to tell me that there is caste in Christianity and therefore asking for reservation?" The Home Minister went on to say, "Look, I know how many millions of dollars Christian leaders and institutions are getting in the name of Dalit Christians. You give them! You give them education, better economic condition, equality and human dignity. Share all these with your people." Thriu Mahajan who was with Mr Advani, smiled and said, "Father, the converts were cheated. If you want equal reservation, if you want the Dalit Christians to have equal rights, ask them to come back to the mother religion; reconvert to mother religion, if within Christianity they are discriminated against. They will have all the privileges of other Dalits". These are words which throw challenge to the Christian communities and their leaders to take up seriously the cause of Dalit Christians in the Church.

Dalit Christians undergo the same social and economic disabilities due to the traditional practice of untouchability. Therefore, they should be included in the schedule caste and paragraph no. 3 in the 1950 presidential order which says that any person who embraces a different religion other than Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism shall be deemed to be member of schedule caste, should be deleted.

### **Where is Your Treasure – There is Your Heart**

Let us see how involved are our priests and religious for the cause of Dalits. Upper caste priests have scant respect for Dalit priests, and the religious congregations studiously avoid giving any position of power to Dalits, and if ever given, they try to snatch it at the earliest opportunity. The religious who run so many educational institutions, seem to pay but lip service to the education of Dalits. They make rhetoric statement about reserving admission and appointment for Dalits. They will exhibit documents of their congregations – chapters and articles – vowing their option for the poor and the Dalits. That serves often for public consumption. That is true even in religious orders that claim to be progressive. One is no better than the other. The high castes in these religious orders do all intrigues and divide among themselves many of these posts. In many religious houses fight – covert and overt – among the upper castes for power and position is the order of the day. How

could they claim then to work for the cause of Dalits? Dalits serve the window-dressing of their institutions which mint money and become bastions for the power of the dominant castes.

Let me cite just one incident which is quite revealing. I referred to many of the protests and demonstrations that have been organized for the rights of Dalits. Few religious take part in this events – hardly a few priests and nuns. Contrast this with what happened in Tamilnadu with the Govidarajan committee appointed by the government to regulate the fees structures in the English medium private schools. A meeting was organized in the Pastoral Centre of the Archdiocese of Madras-Mylapore to take up this issue. Imagine, there were 600 priests and nuns gathered to protest against the Govinadrajan committee and against its regulation of fees! There was no room. . It was a question of their treasure – and we know where their heart was. The issue of Dalits is the last thing they seem to be concerned. Is it wrong then to ask: Has anything changed? The Dalits were happy about the Govindarajan Committee recommendations because with reduction of fees, there was opportunity for poor Dalit children to get quality education. But then we see how the educational institutions run by the Church and by its religious are overwhelmed by the concern of money and the need of poor Dalits takes a back seat.

### **Conclusion**

The vision of Jesus is very clear in his Nazareth manifesto. It is Good News to the Poor, whose freedom, growth and flourishing God wants. For any change towards Dalit Christians to take place, the leaders in the Church, the priests, and the religious should convert to the vision of Jesus. If the Christian community and leaders are really gripped by the Gospel and Jesus' own pattern of life bringing to the fore the neglected, they will involve themselves to transform the Christian communities, Church-institutions into milieu where the Dalits will feel accepted, affirmed and feel that the Church community is with them in their struggle for their dignity and rights. Can we really hope for a real *metanoia* - change of heart and mind – of bishops, priests, religious and upper caste laity? The signs are yet to come. That probably will remove the skepticism of Dalit Christians who are asking: Will anything change?

# **Dalit Christian Struggles for Equal Rights and the Way Forward**

**G. Cosmon Arokiaraj**

The author is currently the secretary of SC/ST Commission of CBCI. This article depicts in broad strokes the processes and landmarks the Dalit Christians have gone through since early twentieth century to resist their oppression in the Church and society. It highlights many less known facts of history and many local leaders who struggled for the liberation of Dalit Christians.

## **Dalit Christian Identity - Imaginary or Real?**

Dalits professing Christian faith organize themselves as Dalits experiencing caste oppression and struggling to overcome discrimination. Consequently, apart from their Christian identity they want to emphasize their liberative Dalit identity.

Within Indian Christian community there are different caste identities and rite identities. The caste element in the Christian identity is highlighted when one speaks, for example, of Reddy Christian, Udayar Christian, Vellala Christian, Syro-Malabar Christian<sup>1</sup>, Syro-Malankara

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<sup>1</sup> The Syrian Christians were able to survive as a cohesive community for over a millennium by incorporating themselves within the caste system as a high caste just below the Brahmins. See Walter Fernandes, "Caste and Conversion Movements," in *Social Movement: Issues of Identity*, ed., T.K. Oommen, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 112.

Christian and so on. It is strange that many Christians feel uncomfortable and even resist when one speaks of Dalit Christians. The same Christians are comfortable with the other types of identities bound up with caste.

From the colonial period onwards, the dominant groups within the Christian community wanted to project the image of a homogeneous Christian community as “Indian Christians”. But Christians from Dalit origin wanted to affirm their separate social and political identity within the Christian community. For example, Christian Depressed Classes of South India in their memorandum to the Indian Statutory Commission headed by Sir John Simon in March 1929 wrote,

The condition of the Depressed Class Christians was not properly gone into at the time of the introduction of the Reforms through the agency of persons who on the one hand tried to conceal the sores in a supposed united Christian body-politic and on the other attempted to throw us into an obscurity out of which they might make profit: the result was that without our knowledge or consent we have become merged in the Indian Christian body-politic of Southern India to be subservient to the wishes of Caste Christians who have no love for us and to help them with our votes for seat in the Council.

One of the main reasons according to the delegation was “it is presumed that we are all Christians, practicing a humanizing religion which preaches equality and charity and love, that we have been united in common fellowship by bonds of religion with Christians of higher castes, and that we have a communal electorate which gives us our representatives in the Councils.”<sup>2</sup>

Again, the National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (NCRLM) or the Ranganath Misra Commission appointed by the Union Government of India, observes,

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2 *Indian Statutory Commission, Vol. XVII, Selections from Memoranda and Oral Evidence by Non-Officials (Part II)*, (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1930), p.338

The caste system, should be recognized as general social characteristic of the Indian society as a whole, without questioning whether the philosophy and teachings of any particular religion recognize it or not – since the Indian brands of certain faith traditions like Christianity and Islam have never assimilated many puritan principles of those religions, posing this question in respect of the caste system only and singling out for a differential treatment is unreasonable and unrealistic.<sup>3</sup>

Prof. Satish Deshpande in his study on Dalits in Muslim and Christian Communities, in 2008, brings out important findings on Dalit Christians.

It is beyond doubt that “DMs (Dalit Muslims) and DCs (Dalit Christians) are socially known and treated as distinct groups within their own religious communities.” It is an undisputable fact “they are invariably regarded as ‘socially inferior’ communities by their co-religionists. **Both Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims are Dalits first and Christians and Muslims only Second.”<sup>4</sup>**

It is very clear that Dalit Christians are a separate social identity within Christian community and they are discriminated people within the Christian community and by the State.

### **An Overview of Dalit Christian Struggle against Discrimination by the State**

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the British began to view Indian society as a conglomeration of different groups with different interests. In the context of evolving responsible self-government for India, various initiatives such as the Morely-Minto Reforms, Montague-Chelmsford Reforms and the Simon Commission were undertaken. Social, economical and educational activities were carried out by social reformers such as Shahuji Maharaj, Mahatma Phule, and particularly

3 Ibid., pp. 153-154. Additional Term of Reference, 16.3.3.

4 Satish Deshpande with the assistance of Geetika Bapna, *Dalits in the Muslim and Christian Communities :A Status Report on Current Social Scientific Knowledge*, prepared for National Commission for Minorities, Government of India (Delhi: Department of Sociology, University of Delhi, 2008), (published by New Delhi: CBCI, NCCI and CDS) p.25(emphasis added).

by the Christian missionaries for the upliftment of the untouchables. Here it is important to mention that representatives from Dalit community began to make representation to the Government to address their problems from 1779 onwards.<sup>5</sup> Leaders like Iyothee Dass, Irattai Malai Srinivasan and others formed organizations and convened many conferences to voice the concerns of Dalits.<sup>6</sup> Dalits who were economically developed due to their job opportunities in Kolar Gold fields, Railways and through their contacts with the British commercial establishments, made financial contributions to establish schools and hostels for Dalit students.<sup>7</sup>

From the memorandum submitted by the Christian Depressed Classes of South India to Simon Commission, it is clear that the Christian Depressed Classes could not avail the benefits given to their Hindu counter part by the British Government. They said:

While, however, the Hindu Depressed Classes have found favour with the Government of Madras so much so that their economic and social conditions are being bettered day by day in various ways, by such measures as free education, liberal scholarships to children, hostel accommodations, house sites, grant of lands, etc. and of particular importance, nomination to Legislatures, Educational bodies, the Senate, District and Taluk Boards, Municipalities etc., the Depressed Class Christians have been most pathetically neglected, ignored and forgotten for no fault of theirs.”<sup>8</sup>

The main reason for including only castes professing Hindu religion in the Scheduled Caste list was directly linked to the practice of untouchability. The Census commissioner J. H. Hutton used certain

5, 6 A. Sundaram, trans. *Dalit Viduthalaiyum Diravida Iyakamum: Marukkappadum Unmaikalum Karaipadinthu Athiyayangalum* (Madurai: Eluthu, 2009) p. 58. This book is a Tamil translation of “Mr. K. Veeramani M.A., B.L., is Refuted and The Historical Facts About the Scheduled Caste’s Struggle for Emancipation in South India,” by T.P. Kamalanathan, published by Ambedkar’s Self-Respect Movement, Tiruppattur, 1985.

7 Ibid., pp. 149-163.

8 Ibid., pp. 67-76.

criteria to identify “Depressed Classes” in the 1931 Census.<sup>9</sup> According to scholars like Lelah Dushkin and Marc Galanter, some of the questions of J. H. Hutton do not have clear answers and some other which can be easily answered are not very helpful. As Satish Deshpande rightly observes various forms of religious and social exclusion and discrimination explicated in the basic feature of the criteria suggested by J. H. Hutton would certainly be found among Muslims and Christians.<sup>10</sup>

The criteria suggested by the Census Commissioner were used to identify the castes to be listed under the Schedules created by the Government of India Act 1935. The Government of India Scheduled Castes Order 1936 was issued under this Act. Paragraph 3 of this Order provides that “No Indian Christian shall be deemed to be a member of Scheduled Caste.”

In the year 1950, the President of India issued the “Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order 1950” specifying the castes to be recognized as the Scheduled Castes by exercising the authority conferred on him under the article 341 (1) of the Constitution of India. The third paragraph of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order 1950, popularly known as the Presidential Order, stipulates that **“no person who professes a religion different from Hinduism shall be deemed to be a member of Scheduled Caste.”** The Order violates the letter and spirit of many articles of our Constitution such as article 15 that mentions equal treatment of all citizens and article 25 that speaks about freedom of religion.

The discrimination perpetrated by paragraph 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, has been officially ratified by further orders from the Government. A letter from the Ministry of Home Affairs (letter no. 18/4/58-SCT IV, dated 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1959) further

9 *Indian Statutory Commission, Vol. XVII, Selections from Memoranda and Oral Evidence by Non-Officials (Part II)*, p.338

10 J. Hutton suggests *nine* criteria to identify Depressed Classes. See Satish Deshpande with the assistance of Geetika Bapna, *Dalits in the Muslim and Christian Communities: A Status Report on Current Social Scientific Knowledge*, pp. 44-45.

stipulated that Scheduled Caste converts from Hinduism to other religions would become eligible to all the benefits meant for the Scheduled Castes when they revert to Hinduism any time.

Again, this discrimination deprives Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims the right to seek protection and safeguards provided to all Dalits under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989. Thus the paragraph 3 of the Presidential Order 1950 is a blatant violation and denial of human rights of a citizen under our Constitution as well as under Article 2, 3 and 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations, to which India is a signatory.

Many Backward Class Commissions acknowledge the social and economical backwardness of Christians of Scheduled Caste Origin and recommend Scheduled Caste status to them.<sup>11</sup>

The very recent report by NCRLM in 2007 recommends to the Union of India the following: "we recommend that para 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order 1950 - which originally restricted the Scheduled Caste net to the Hindus and later opened it to Sikhs and Buddhists, thus still excluding from its purview the Muslims, Christians, Jains and Parsis, etc. - should be wholly deleted by appropriate action so as to completely de-link the Scheduled Caste status from religion and make the Scheduled Castes net fully religion- neutral like that of the Scheduled Tribes."<sup>12</sup>

The Government asked the National Commission for Scheduled Castes, a Constitutional body to give its opinion on the recommendations of the NCRLM. It has recommended that reservation should be extended to Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims and fully endorsed the recommendations of the NCRLM report concerning Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims.

11 Ibid., p. 45.

12 Shri. Kaka Kalekar Backward Class Commission, 1955, Nettur Commission Report, 1970, the report of the Backward Class Commission of Andhra Pradesh (1970), Kumar Pillai Commission Report, 1965, Elayaperumal Commission, 1969, Chidambaram Report (Evaluation Report on Intensive Agricultural Area Programme, Government of Tamilnadu, June 1975, Mandal Commission Report.

Analyzing and accepting the social disabilities experienced by the Christians of Scheduled Caste origin, the State Governments of Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Andhra Pradesh have recommended to the Union of India to extend Scheduled Caste status to the Christians of Scheduled Caste origin.

Most of the political parties in India including the allies of BJP in National Democratic Alliance, except BJP, have supported the demand of Scheduled Caste Status to Christians and Muslims of Scheduled Caste origin (Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims) and written letters to the Prime Minister and concerned authorities.<sup>13</sup> Further, United Nation's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination recommends that "the (Indian) State party restore the eligibility for affirmative action benefits of all members of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes having converted to another religion."<sup>14</sup>

### **Efforts made by the Christian Community to overcome the Discrimination by the State**

The Christian community from 1950s onwards launched peaceful agitations on their behalf directed towards both the Union and State Governments. Various attempts were made and steps were undertaken so far to obtain justice and equal treatment for the Dalit Christians. We can classify these efforts under three eras: 1) Era of meeting with political leaders, submitting memoranda (1950s- 1980s). 2) Era of *dharnas*, rallies, lobbying with political leaders, litigation, private member Bills (1990s-2000). 3) Era of intense legal battle, lobbying with national and international bodies and leaders, gathering information under Right

13 Ibid. p.154. Additional Term of Reference, 16.3.5.

14 Communist Party of India, Communist Party of India (Marxist), Bahujan Samaj Party, Samajvadi Party, Lok Jansakthi Party, Rashtriya Janata Dal, Janata Dal (United), Janta Dal (Secular), Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Telugu Desam Party, Marumalartchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, Pattali Makkal Katchi, Trinamool Congress, National Congress Party, Shiromani Akalidal and others have written letters to the Union Government of India. See *Let Justice be done to all Dalits*, a booklet published by CBCI Commission for SC/ST/BC, New Delhi, 2010.

to Information Act, demonstrations, collaboration with Dalit Muslims and other Human Rights groups (from 2000 onwards).

There were correspondences between leaders of the organizations and the Prime Minister and the President. For instance, the reply received by Rev. Fr. Jerome D'Souza, sj, and Dr. H.C. Mookerjee, both then members of Parliament from the President Rajendra Prasad on 6-12-1950 makes it clear that it is “not the intention of the Government of India that there should be any difference on grounds of religion or Caste. The only effect intended by this Order is that converts to Christianity will no longer be entitled to the political privileges of reservation seats in Parliament or the State Assembly.” The reply further stated that it was not intended that such Christians if they are in fact backward should be denied privileges such as scholarships to which they were entitled prior to the setting up of the Constitution.<sup>15</sup>

In spite of the clarification and interpretation contained in the letters of the President and the Prime Minister and also of the several Ministers of the Government of India, some of the State Governments refused to accept the directives or advice of the Centre. They stuck to their right to interpret the Constitution Order in a sense which excludes the Christians from the Scheduled Castes on the plea that there is no caste in Christianity.

Letters were written to the authorities concerned by Archbishop Thomas Pothacamury of Bangalore in 1958, Bishop of Amravathi in 1962, Cardinal Gracias, President of the CBCI in 1966, by the CBCI again in 1970 (this time even mentioning about Scheduled Castes in Islam), by the Christian Members of Parliament, by Catholic Union of India several times to extend Scheduled Castes status to Dalit Christians.<sup>16</sup>

At the CBCI General Body Meeting in Mangalore in January 1978, the final statement emphasized that the Bishops were committed to struggle on behalf of the Scheduled Caste Christians so that the

15 See UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination Seventieth session, 19 February – 9 March 2007, in its Concluding observations on India

16 Ibid., p.5.

discrimination practiced against them on the basis of religion may soon end.<sup>17</sup>

Mammoth rallies were conducted on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1984 in Madurai, 24<sup>th</sup> September 1989 in Trichy, 17<sup>th</sup> September 1990 in New Delhi, 21<sup>st</sup> November 1992 in Vijayawada, several dharnas were held in the National Capital in 1990s.<sup>18</sup> Private Member Bills to amend the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order 1950 were moved in the Parliament by Hon. P. J. Kurien in 1983, Shri Narayanaswamy in 1993. In the regional level long marches were conducted in Tamilnadu in March 2010 and in September 2010 in Kerala.

In December 2006, the National Council of Dalit Christians, a lay movement of various Dalit Christian movements in the national level conducted a relay hunger strike to demand Scheduled Caste status to Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims. From then on this movement in collaboration with National Coordination Committee for Dalit Christians (a joint program of CBCI and NCCI) undertook various dharnas and rallies in New Delhi. During the sessions of the parliament in 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010 rallies and dharnas were conducted and at other times intense lobbying went on.

The delegation of Bishops and the laity met the Prime Minister and various ministers, the Chairpersons of National Commission for Minorities, National Commission for Scheduled Castes. The National Commission for Minorities initiated a study by the University of Delhi and now we have the study on Dalits in Muslim and Christian communities by Prof. Satish Deshpande.

During the Catholic Council of India meeting at Ranchi in December 2007, nearly 200 delegates signed a memorandum requesting the Union Government to extend Scheduled Caste status to Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims. At the CBCI General Body Meetings at Jamshedpur in February 2008 and at Gwahati in March 2010, memoranda signed by nearly 160 Bishops were sent to the Prime Minister urging the Union Government to include Dalit Christians in the Scheduled Caste list.

A delegation jointly by the CBCI, NCCI and NCDC met international bodies such OHRC, the European Union Delegation and requested them to urge the Union Government to extend Scheduled Caste status to Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims.

The case is pending in the Supreme Court due to the purposeful delay of the Union Government of India to give a reply to the Court in spite of the assurance given in January 2008 to the Court that they would give a reply within eight weeks. Almost 2 years and 11 months have elapsed.

We need more collective actions at the regional, national and international level to pressurize the Union Government to act.

### **An Overview of Struggles for Equality within the Christian Community**

The protest of Dalit Christians against discrimination has a long history. There were protests against discrimination in Pondicherry (The Pariah Revolution of Pondicherry in 1831) and at Pudur, Madurai, Tamilnadu in 1880. In 1844 the caste Christians revolted against the attempt of the Synod of Pondicherry for a reunion. They demanded a wall of separation in their church at Nellithope and sent an appeal to Rome.

Inspired by the ideals of Anti-Brahminic Movements, Self Respect Movement and Temple Entry campaigns, Dalit Catholics “demanded an end to their inferior, segregated status within Catholic institutions.” But the Protestant Dalits decried their inferior status in relation to caste Christians but they concentrated more in protesting against the Government that denied assistance to the Dalit Christians solely because they were Christians. They insisted that their disabilities persisted in spite of their change of faith.<sup>19</sup>

In 1930s, as Dalit concerns became politically more important, Dalit Christians grew more vocal within Church.<sup>20</sup> For instance, the resolution

19 Ibid., pp. 72-82.

20 Chandra Mallampalli, *Christians and Public Life in Colonial South India, 1863-1937* (New Delhi: Orient Longman (P) Ltd., 2006 [reprint], first published in London by Routledge Curzon in 2004), pp.199-200.

of the Madras Presidency Untouchable Christian Conference convened at Trichinoploy in July 1933 demanded the ecclesiastical authorities to address the grievances of Dalit Catholics within three months and if not, the authorities would be construed as having granted them “permission to change their faith and Canon Law would not be binding upon them.” There were also large-scale boycotts of mass carried out by Dalit Catholics in Madurai, Trichinopoly and Kumbakonam.<sup>21</sup> The leader of the anti-caste agitation in Kumbakonam, Marianathan observed: “*The Catholic priests* who ought to be interested in the elevation of the Adi Dravida Catholics that formed the bulk of their congregation were using them only as milk cattle for collecting money out of them, but denying them the rights which belonged to them. The abolition of “caste” in the new Cathedral at Kumbakonam was stoutly opposed more by the *priests* than by the other “caste” worshippers themselves.”<sup>22</sup>

Till today discrimination against Dalit Christians exist in Christian community. In Eraiyyur of Villupuram District in Tamilnadu the funeral procession of the mother of a priest was prevented from proceeding along the main streets because she was a Dalit Christian. In March 2008, Dalit Christian houses were destroyed and they were attacked for demanding equal rights in parish feast and administration

The Church leaders have accepted that caste discrimination and untouchable practices exist within the Church and exhorted the people to move towards greater equality. His Holiness John Paul II on 17 November, 2003 while addressing a group of Bishops from India, said:

They [Christians of SC origin] should never be segregated from other members of society. Any semblance of a caste-based prejudice in relations between Christians is a countersign to authentic human solidarity, a threat to genuine spirituality and a serious hindrance to the Church’s mission of evangelization. Therefore, customs or traditions that perpetuate or reinforce

21 Ibid., p. 179.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., p.181.

caste division should be sensitively reformed so that they may become an expression of solidarity of the whole Christian community.

### **Suggested Way Forward for Dalit Christians**

Dalit Christian struggle against the discrimination by the state is more than a reservation issue. It is a human rights issue. It means deprival of the fundamental rights enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The paragraph 3 of the Presidential Order is a communal order. Hence, Dalit Christian struggle for equal rights needs to be an agenda of all those groups who want to uphold the secular principles enshrined in the Constitution of India and who want to safeguard human rights.

The entire Christian community needs to wake up from its deep slumber. Many Dalit people are leaving the Churches because of the discriminatory policy of the Union Government. At the same time, there are people who remain steadfast and suffer. When a part of the body suffers the entire body should feel the pain and take measures to alleviate the suffering. What prevents the entire Christian community to take up Dalit Christian cause effectively and resolutely?

A more credible and meaningful presence of Christian community in India is possible only when it shares the pain and agony of its own marginalized members and other excluded groups.

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# **Anatomy of Humiliation and Signs of Hope**

**Francis P. Xavier**

The author is a formal provincial of the Society of Jesus, and currently director of Loyola-ICAM College of Engineering and Technology, Chennai. The author shows the many obstacles placed on the path of Dalit Christians and the manipulation to which they are subjected in the Church, in religious societies etc. This critical anatomy of humiliation in the first part is followed by a constructive second part in which the author makes some valuable suggestions for the promotion of Dalit Christians and their liberation.

## **Reality of Humiliation**

The condition of the Dalits should be placed in the context of poverty, starvation, discrimination, social isolation and hegemony. Together they make up a life of humiliation for the Dalit people. Three broad aspects of the present condition should be recognized:

- Social marginalization by communal politics;
- Apathy of the State relating to the problems of Dalits and insensitivity to the atrocities perpetrated against them; and
- Internal problem of exclusion and discrimination in the Church: The indifference of the Church authorities and their authoritarianism.

In this situation the Dalits in general and Dalit Christians in particular feel left out to fend for themselves. Their abysmal condition of being humiliated echoes the agony behind the words of Job:

'I wish I had died before any eye saw me. If only I had never come into being, or had been carried straight from the womb to the grave!' (Job 10:18f).

The Dalits are systematically suppressed and they are deprived of their rights step by step. The personhood of a Dalit is systematically annihilated, and this destruction of identity helps the oppressor to reduce a Dalit to an object. Objects have no rights. Do they? For many in the Church, the Dalit issue is reduced to the question of BC/ST. Dalits are looked down upon by the ecclesiastical powers, and by the leaders and high caste members of religious orders, who do not cease to talk about "option for the poor". There is no effective will to go into a deeper analysis of the humiliation of the Dalits and their abject poverty, much less to come out with solutions that would empower them.

For the Dalits, the Church community, its leaders, its religious societies simply reflect what is happening in the larger society. The same "untouchability" is practiced – covertly and overtly - within the Church, and the Dalits are continuously humiliated. In the Catholic Church, untouchability goes even beyond life to reach the realm of the dead! We see how Christian Dalits live in the colonies at the periphery of the villages where upper caste Christians live and we are also aware how the dead Dalits are condemned to a separate 'colony' of burial ground. The society humiliates them while they are alive and the Church continues to separate them in discrimination even after death.

## I. Anatomy of Humiliation

Many strategies are adopted in everyday life to humiliate and discredit the Dalits and pull them down. In this analysis, I base myself on my experience as a Dalit in a religious congregation and as someone who has also been a provincial of a religious society. Here are some of incidents, anecdotes, and events. They are meant to throw light on the plight of the Dalit Christians in the Church.

### Stigmatizing and Stereotyping

There is a systematic propaganda by the upper castes that Dalits are incapable and inefficient. When a Dalit is elected or appointed to

some administrative post, the immediate reaction is: 'But he/she is a Dalit'. The subscript is clear. The appointed person is subtly reminded – not infrequently even openly – that he or she is appointed just because he or she is a Dalit. Dalits are not supposed to be efficient. When K. R. Narayan was elected the President of Indian Republic, his intellectual stature and competence as a seasoned diplomat and astute statesman were not acknowledged. What was highlighted, instead, was his Dalit origin, and his appointment itself was seen as an opportunity given to a Dalit. It is not different in the Church. Non-Dalits would brand the Dalit priests, religious, teachers, students, and people in general, as incompetent and unfit, and if ever they are elected, it is viewed as a concession done to a Dalit. A Dalit has to put in about 200% hard work in order to get about 5% recognition; for others it is the other way round!

### **Dalit Vocations**

When it comes to promoting vocations to priesthood or to religious life, we often hear platitudes like the need of getting candidates from 'good families'. What is implied is that Dalit families are no good (because they are untouchables) and God could 'touch' only the 'good families' and not the 'untouchables'! History of Indian Church would tell us how late Dalits were recruited to priesthood and religious life, and numerous are cases where Dalit candidates are sent out from seminaries and religious houses stating that they do not have vocation. When God chooses the humble and humiliated, the rectors and religious superiors send them away.

### **Dalit Formation**

Even a cursory glance at the various religious congregations would indicate that even the few Dalits who manage to survive in the religious life are being utilized for menial and household jobs (with a few exceptions perhaps). They would not be sent for higher education or training even if they exhibit intellectual and administrative aptitudes. Even when one or other Dalit manages to do higher studies, it is nearly impossible for them to reach the level of administrators or Seminary Rectors or formation-in-charge. It is for anybody to check the statistics

and note how few Dalit priests and religious are in positions with decision-making power. For many priests and religious taking “orders” or “direction” from a Dalit bishop, superior or provincial proves to be very hard.

### **Dalit Brand**

In the face of glaring discrimination, when Dalits, awakened to their dignity and human rights, demand for fairness and justice, they are branded. They speak of Dalits as a “bundle of emotions” incapable of reasoning or they are said to demand “too much”. With growing social consciousness, the Dalits are challenging such branding and misconceptions..

### **Dalit Servitude**

Jesus said that a servant is entitled to his/her wage (Lk 10:7). But in the case of the Dalit, no credit is offered. When a Dalit does well, praise or acknowledgement is slow to come by. Whereas if they make a mistake it is quickly detected and blown out of proportion. If a Dalit succeeds, the grudging admission is interspersed with such comments as, “after all he/she is a Dalit”. Like in the society, in the Church and in its institutions too, Dalits are supposed to do the work of servitude, and nothing more. These are ways in which “untouchability” is practiced within the Church, among its leaders and the religious.

### **Impression vs Facts**

Mark of any scientific approach to human and societal problem is that it is based on facts. When facts are not looked into and when people act on the basis of impression, it could easily be irrational and could cause a lot of damage. Such is the case with the Dalits. While facts and statistics show how little Dalits are represented in the hierarchy and in positions of power in the religious orders, the impression created and propagated is that they are dominating. One tends to believe that things have changed overnight and that the Dalits are in command today while the non-Dalits are being dominated. But the simple truth is that in spite of Dalits constituting the majority of Christians in this country, they are marginalized. False impressions and rumours are ways in which the emergence of Dalits is being stunted systematically.

## **Guerilla Warfare and Honour Killings**

Even when a Dalit succeeds, in spite of biting comments and damaging remarks, the next step is character assassination. The usual attacks are favouritism, nepotism, womanizing, hoarding of money and so on. An important means for all this is the use of anonymous letters. When occasionally a Dalit is proposed for either ecclesiastical or administrative position, there will be a flood of anonymous letters to higher authorities tarnishing his or her image. We read about 'honour killings' in the country, which has now attracted the attention of the Supreme Court. But in the religious congregations so many are mercilessly massacred: Either they are quitting, unable to bear the humiliation they suffer, or they silently suffer much of discrimination, even to the point of reaching state of high depression and dejection

### **Instigation of Others**

If the guerilla warfare does not succeed, the next one would be proxy war! This happens often in religious congregations. Laity of the so-called high caste groups having affinity with the high caste religious would be instigated to rise against the Dalits. Inside information would be passed on to them and they would either spread false rumours or print posters or write to higher authorities (often in the name of some 'association' or 'trust'). It is in this manner that, recently a public interest litigation (PIL) has been registered against the preferential option of the Jesuits for the Dalits.

### **Dividing the Dalits**

As is well-known, there are several sub-groups among the Dalits. This is taken as an advantage by the upper castes who set one group of Dalits against the other. Through allurement of money and promise of power, Dalits are easily bought. They are set one against the other and thus their solidarity gets weakened and the ideals of human rights and dignity are thrown to the winds. Dalits are bought by the priests and the religious by money of the Church/Congregation which is supposed to be used for the good of the people of God.

### **Public Face vs Hidden Scripts**

This is a modern hypocrisy. Many have a public face of standing for the cause of the Dalits. But they also have a hidden script. In

public they would speak for the liberation and empowering of the Dalits, but in private they would dig the grave for them. There are others who would represent Dalit rights at international fora, but back at home would subtly work against the emergence of Dalits and their power.

There are many other ways – open and subtle – which work against the interests of the Dalits. I have mentioned only a few of them. Now, let us move on to reflect how we overcome these kind of strategies with positive proposals and measures.

## **II. Countering Humiliation - Drawing from the Scriptures**

To challenge the forces working in the Church against the cause of the Dalit, we need to base ourselves on the Bible and what it has to say in terms of the liberation of the oppressed.

### **Paradigm shift – Dalits as Crucified People**

Jon Sobrino talks about the crucified people. They are the passive martyrs: These are the poor and the victims. They live a life of misery and misfortune and their lives come to an end through a process of slow death. Some die violent death due to oppression. The Dalits are today the crucified people as they are every day crucified afresh on the cross of humiliation, neglect, marginalization and discrimination.

The Bible is a story of liberation. Yahweh, the prophets, and Jesus stood for the poor and the marginalized. In Egypt, Yahweh heard the cries that the overseers' cruelty forced upon the people of Israel. By liberating the oppressed people God reveals God's self as their God. In Jesus' trial, passion and death, God sees an injustice committed against the just and the innocent, and God raises him from the dead. This again reveals God as the one who holds power over the forces of death. All this allows us to speak legitimately about the "God of Israel" representing the oppressed people. Is there any difficulty then, to speak of the "God of Dalits"? That would exactly reflect the spirit of the Bible and Jesus' mode of praxis. He sees God from the perspective of the poor, the victims and the humiliated. Jesus was crucified once but the Dalits are crucified so often on the cross of discrimination and humiliation and the foot of the cross is still wet with their blood-shed. If the Church is not able to address the untouchability and bring in effective measures, then the Church has failed in her mission here on earth.

Crucifixion is not the end. In the resurrection of the oppressed, the poor and the Dalit we see the resurrection of Jesus and the power of God's life. Irenaeus in the second century said: 'Gloria Dei, vivens homo' (The glory of God lives in human being); in the last century Archbishop Oscar Romero said: "Gloria Dei, vivens pauper" (The glory of God lives in the poor); and today we could say, with justification, "*Gloria Dei, vivens Dalit*" (The glory of God lives in the Dalits). The Jesuit saint Alberto Hurtado said: 'The poor man is Christ'. In the Church we don't seem to do even what the State is doing for the resurrection of the marginalized. In the recent professional college admission directives, the Tamilnadu government has allocated seat-reservation for BCMuslims (BCM) and SCArunthathyars (SCA) in addition to BC and SC reservations. Do we – Have we evolved anything similar for the Dalit Catholics in the Church and in religious congregations so that the crucified people may experience resurrection?

### III. Planting Signs of Hope

If the Church and Religious Congregations are genuine and serious about the Dalits and their plight, they should be ready to take measures that would spell hope for this humiliated people. Let me highlight some of these measures and strategies that need to be followed today.

- *Data on the Dalits*: The Indian Government has initiated the next census which would include caste as well. The Church could recommend it strongly and at the same time it needs to conduct a professional census with regard to Catholic Dalits in the Church.
- While the government is going all out to reserve seats for the BCs and MBCs and SC/STs, the Church should do better with regard to affirmative action or reservation. The Church and the Religious Congregation should be proactive with regard to affirmative action.
- The 10-Point Programme of the Tamilnadu Bishops' Council (TNBC), which was reduced to 8-Point Programme, should be effectively implemented.
- The Church and the Religious Congregations should come up with concrete proposals to foreground the Dalits and their cause

by including them in the decision-making centres and bodies and in the administration of Religious Congregations. In the society, we need to train the downtrodden as leaders starting from Panchayat to Corporate levels to international levels in order to turn them as social and political leaders with sound knowledge of economy.

- Efforts should be taken to promote vocations among the Dalits, and they should be trained in skills as to become men and women of great competence, creativity and commitment.
- In all the educational and professional institutions of the Catholics, the marginalized, the first generation learners and the slow learners should get prior attention in their formation.
- There should be more grass roots level people's institutions, movements, primary schools and rural based hostels to improve the education of the Dalit children.
- There is need for attitudinal change. This calls for conversion, namely intellectual acceptance of equality of the Dalits and heart-level realization of their dignity as brothers and sisters of Jesus and hence of us.
- The ever increasing restlessness and protests and demonstrations, both at local as well as at national levels are the signs of demands for equality and human dignity on the part of the Dalits. We see more and more Dalits are slowly ascending the steps of economy and leadership but this needs to be accelerated.
- To foster economic empowerment of the Dalits, the Church could start entrepreneur centres (through Micro-Finance Institutions) which would help the marginalized to pick up some business (supported by cooperatives). This would ensure economic stability paving the way to the decline in social disabilities
- The plight of the Dalits should be made known to all, both at national as well as international levels. Today, many journals and books on the atrocities against Dalits are making their impact. However it requires to be widened and strengthened to which the Church could contribute.

## Conclusion

The option for the Dalits is not optional for the Church. Let us keep working for the empowerment of the marginalized Dalits. Our involvement for liberation is for those who are the victims in the present order of the society. The victims need to move from the periphery to the centre. Here is the crucial role of the Church which needs to convert itself to the cause of the Dalits. It starts with the change and transformation of mind and consciousness wherein are ingrained deep prejudices against the Dalits. That will pave the way to give up the mechanisms and intrigues through which the Church, its leaders and religious orders humiliate and sideline the Dalits. It should be accompanied by positive measures of hope. The awakened consciousness of the Dalits and their demands are salutary in as much as they could contribute to shake the lethargy of the Church, its leaders and its religious and move them towards the empowerment of the Dalits.

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# **Dalit Christian Women Today Their Struggles and Prospects for Future**

**Bama**

The author is a well-known writer and novelist with Dalit Women as her focus. In this article she analyses the struggles of Dalit women, especially Dalit Christian women, and the many forces that oppress them and chain them. Having done that, she goes on to show the possible future direction Dalit women's liberation could take and makes some very pertinent and concrete suggestions that could be put into practice in the Church.

## **Introduction**

The history and story especially of Dalit women, have been a story of thousand oppressions by the triple headed, centuries-old monster of caste, class and gender. To be born into an untouchable caste is the worst misfortune that can happen to a woman. Such a woman is a non-person, often with no right to property, no guarantee for her right to life, liberty and reputation and to free exercise of her powers, talents and choices. This destroys her freedom, and saps her life of all vitality and stunts her growth. According to the caste ideology, though she has the physical appearance of a human being, she is not truly human. The caste-gender stereotype sees her as a defiling, unintelligent creature, whose very presence pollutes. She can find some justification for her existence only by serving men and the upper castes.

## **Victims of a Patriarchal, Caste Culture**

The triple oppression on the basis of caste, class and gender makes Dalit women a powerless lot because it is sanctioned and legitimized by religion and patriarchal culture. The blending of religious and social myths, that reflect and justify the male dominant, caste culture, keeps them passive, dependent and inferior to men and prevents them from rebelling. Women have been not merely influenced, but brainwashed by the patriarchal caste culture with its male defined traits and expectations which have masked women's true identity as persons and women. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that they are made slaves of men and other upper-caste women and forced to live a life of silence, passivity and dependence, without being able to realize their true capacities, to think and stand up for themselves. Their real selves as human persons are eclipsed by layers of patriarchal culture, concepts, and male-defined ideals of Sita-like or Mary-like femininity which are sustained through tradition with its customs and practices, art and literature and through a process of internalization through the myths, doctrines and rituals of religions.

For a Dalit woman, her primary identity is that of Dalit, rather than that of a woman. It is her Dalitness, the curse of untouchability that is the major cause of her dehumanization. Since our society is not merely a male dominated one, but an upper-caste, male dominated society, the Dalit women's problems are unique as she is truly a Dalit among Dalits.

### **A situation of Unending Violence**

Millions of Dalit women live in an atmosphere of constant violence in their homes and in the society at large. A Dalit woman's struggle for survival is as complex as her existence. Too often we hear that Dalit women are molested, raped, abused and subjected to all kinds of sexual violence and often murdered. As they belong to an oppressed and vulnerable community, they become the prime and easy targets for caste, class and sexual violence. Whenever there is a caste conflict, the first victims are Dalit women. For upper caste men, molesting, raping and killing Dalit women is the ultimate symbolic assertion of their caste power and superiority.

Violence at home ranges from denying female children the opportunities for education and development to incidence of child marriages, compulsory marriages, wife beating, harassment and humiliation often meted out to them by their alcoholic husbands. 'Right to life' is not a natural thing for women; it is a concession given, an act of mercy shown by men and a male chauvinistic society. A landlord has no hesitation to rape a Dalit woman. He will be cautious in using filthy, abusive language to a non Dalit woman, but everything he says to a Dalit woman will be filthy, abusive and demeaning. The caste, class and gender factors join hands to crush Dalit women utterly.

### **Economic Impoverishment**

Poverty adds to their vulnerability and turns them into helpless victims who are deprived of social, cultural and political freedoms. Poverty for Dalit women is not just low income and consumption, but the end-product of a complex of multiple deprivations, causing premature death, chronic undernourishment, illiteracy, illness, social exclusion and inequality at every level. They work for more than sixteen hours a day and sacrifice their wellbeing and happiness for the sake of others. While lacking the opportunities and the means to be adequately nourished, decently clothed, and minimally educated, their desires, aspirations and imaginations tend to be blighted to the extent that they no longer recognize themselves or have the courage to dream dreams and articulate their rights to lead a decent human life.

Most Dalit women work as coolies on daily wages. Though her work-load is same as that of a man, she is paid less than a male worker. Many are forced to do filthy and menial jobs. Because of their poverty, most of them live in huts. They are allowed to live on the outskirts of the village where there are no facilities of drainage, toilets or drinking water.

### **Negative Impact of Globalization on Dalit Women**

Mechanization, liberalization and globalization have only made Dalit woman's life worse. The fertile lands where food grains are grown are increasingly used to grow cash crops and to build up industries and factories. The waste-lands where she used to graze cattle and sheep are now handed over to those who are willing to start horticultural

farms or non agricultural income generating projects. So, many are displaced from their familiar places. A Dalit woman depends mostly on land and nature for her survival; to collect firewood, to graze cattle, to collect grass, to collect some food materials such as greens, vegetables and medicinal herbs. But now she has lost everything. Her skills are no more wanted and she finds herself out of work and out of place which makes her life more miserable. It looks like that forces unleashed by globalization and free market economy will further impoverish and exclude women from any meaningful participation in the economic processes of the country and they will end up as migrants living on the periphery of cities because they lack education, technical skills and income generating assets.

We also have to take note of the consumerist cultural revolution that free market economy is aggressively unleashing. It dangles before Dalit women the possibility of their individually attaining upward social mobility and enjoying these consumer goods for themselves. Such an individualistic culture goes against the grain of Dalit women who traditionally cherish a shared community existence and striving; it fragments their unity.

### **Politics and Dalit Women**

In Indian politics, women, and more so Dalit women, are exploited by politicians as vote banks. They have not been given positions of power in most of the political parties. In politics too, the wisdom, courage and strength of Dalit women are suppressed by the patriarchal-caste system. Most of the Dalit women use their right to vote but without having any proper political choices or alternatives. It is a pity that even the Ambedkar and Periyar inspired parties are no different from the other male dominated political parties. In the coalition politics of today, parties which were started to espouse the Dalit cause are today forced to sacrifice Dalit rights on the altar of the so-called coalition 'dharma'. In this situation the empowerment of Dalit women through democratic political processes remain as distant as ever.

### **Religion and Dalit Women**

Religion justifies the inferior status of Dalit women. It aggravates the already existing harsh life-situation of Dalit women by reinforcing

and legitimizing the dominant values, attitudes, ideology and practices which make Dalit women feel that they are inferior creatures and sinners. While the majority of them are led on the path of degradation and subjugation by Hinduism, a few have embraced Christianity with the hope of escaping the clutches of untouchability and caste discrimination. However, these hopes were belied and they are disillusioned to find that caste discrimination and the resultant injustice and violence are rampant in the Christian Churches. This in spite of the fact that Dalits constitute the majority in these Churches. It is an apartheid situation where the minority discriminates against and rules over the majority. This is possible because the ignorance of the Dalits is exploited at all times, and religion is used to perpetuate their ignorance. Religion is used to mask the oppressive reality and create a false and uncritical consciousness and passivity in them. Their simplicity, piety, un-worldliness, attitudes of caring and sharing and their compassionate nature are exploited in the name of God by religion. Because of their repeated experiences of untouchability and caste discrimination, they reach a stage where they voluntarily seclude themselves.

The Catholic Church which perpetuates its male character through its male priesthood, exercises its power over Dalit women not only by getting them do what they do not want to do but also exercises power over them by influencing, shaping and determining their very desires and wants. The supreme exercise of power over others is to make them want the desires you want them to have, which means securing their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires. This authority of the Church is accepted blindly simply because it is supposed to be sanctioned by divine will with a promise of eternal reward for the obedient and threat of eternal punishment for the disobedient.

What disturbs me is that the brutal violence, exploitation and exclusion which is the lot of Dalit women within the patriarchal and caste ridden society and culture, which I have described so far, is not a concern of the Church of Jesus Christ who never refused to take the side of a humiliated and excluded woman, and declare publicly his acceptance and love for her. Instead, the Church inculcates a spirituality which exhorts them to endure all sufferings with fortitude and

forgiveness, to suffer and bear one's cross and be like Christ. The cross is presented as a symbol of unprotesting acceptance of unjust suffering and oppression.

To sum up: To be a Dalit woman is an existence broken and shattered under the curse of caste and untouchability, poverty and illiteracy, segregation and violence, blame and humiliation, threats and intimidations, inabilities and utter lack of opportunities and freedoms. The tragedy is that for her survival she has learnt to accept this situation as something natural.

### **Areas of light**

What is important is that in spite of all this, or rather, in the midst of all this, a Dalit woman has the ability to keep alive the flame of human love and hope, and this is truly the triumph of humanity. And this blossoming and fruition of humanity in the face of heavy odds is the very heart of Dalit existence and culture. We are able to laugh forgetting the pain of life even when we meet with obstacles and sorrow. When we are shunned as untouchables, unseeables and unapproachable and excluded from human discourse and fellowship by our so called fellow humans we are able to bond with nature and our lives become part of the symphony of the earth and the sky, hills and clouds, animals and birds, flowers and dew drops, water and fire. With its inbuilt qualities of resistance, defiance and resilience our culture enables us to live in this dehumanizing situation with dignity and without losing our humanity and keeping intact our rationality, our sense of humour, our love for life and our hope for a more humane future.

### **Prospects for the future:**

#### **Casting our Caste for a Humane Future**

Rooting ourselves firmly in our strengths, while at the same time being fully aware of the darkness in which we were and are forced to live, we need to visualize a more humane future for all of us. And the necessary condition for this new future to be realized is the casting out of the demon of caste from the Church. Dalit women need empowerment not because they are born inferior as the *Varnashrama dharma* and *Karma* theories would postulate. They need empowerment because they are made powerless by the caste system, which with its

barbaric theory and practice of untouchability, inflicts on them violence and atrocities, and denies them the basic rights to life, liberty, security, knowledge and the other resources needed for a dignified life. More than the physical and material damage it inflicts, caste damages the individual and collective consciousness and psyche of the oppressed people. Reduced to a dehumanized existence for centuries, they begin to accept and interiorize their inferior position as the divinely willed situation. This cultural violence leads to the destruction of self-esteem, self-love and self acceptance which are the basis of an empowered existence. That is why we say that caste system is truly demonic and needs to be cast out with the same urgency, anger and vigour with which Jesus cast out demons. Since the days of De Nobili and his accommodation to the social practice of caste, it has invaded the Church and made itself at home there. If the empowerment of Dalit women is to take place, the Church has to exorcise the demon of caste from its mentality, culture, structures, policies and practices. This is the imperative of our faith which promises equality, freedom and dignity to its followers.

### **Directions for the Future**

I shall now indicate a few concrete steps that have to be taken if such a future is to be realized:

1. Without minimizing the painful humiliations and unjust discriminations that we have been subjected to, we need to pass over from a victim hood mentality to a state of active resistance to all dehumanizing structures and practices and from there to a mode of creative responsibility. We, the Dalits, constitute the majority in the Church. As the *anawim* to whom the kingdom of justice, peace and fellowship of God is entrusted, it is incumbent on us to transform the institutional, hierarchical, male dominated Church to a People's Church, a People's movement of Jesus.
2. This will not happen through our pious wishes or wishful thinking. We need to revive the Dalit upsurge demanding equality and justice that shook the Church in the early nineties and brought about a sea change in the Church's attitude and approach to Dalits. However the Official Church has managed to manipulate that

upsurge and liberative movement of Dalit Christians and to replace it with pliable right-wing movements that refuse to intervene even when blatant caste injustices take place in parishes like Erayur and Thatchur in the state of Tamilnadu. We have to realize that empowerment of Dalits and Dalit women in particular will not be a benign and conflict free process. It will take the Ambedkarian path of liberation by organizing, educating and agitating. The policies of empowering of the hitherto powerless groups will also be contested violently by groups who have been enjoying power and privileges so far. For the Church this can be an unenviable situation. But this I believe is Church's way of the cross that will lead it to the resurrection of its children.

3. From our present marginalized situation on the periphery we need to move into the decision making centres in the Church. This calls for active participation in the parish councils, Pastoral Councils which should take up the real issues that affect the life of the people rather than investing time, energy and resources in settling the internal affairs of the Church.
4. In all this, the role and participation of Dalit women is crucial. Today they are brainwashed by an otherworldly spirituality and piety which, while reinforcing their long suffering attitude, also silences their questions, their natural spirit of resistance and defiance and turns them into submissive servants to do menial jobs in the Church. In their actual day to day life they are not strangers to struggles and uncertainties in life. They should be helped to engage in the liberative struggle for justice and Dalit rights. For this they need to develop their critical thinking develop their natural talents and capacities in order to enter a process though which they will gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. It includes control over both resources and ideology, and a growth of intrinsic capability resulting in greater self confidence and an inner transformation, and strengthening of their consciousness. All this enables them to deal with external barriers. Survival capacities of Dalit women, their immense capacity for hard, sustained physical labour and their zest for life can be a very valuable asset for creating a worthwhile future.

5. To create a better future we need to invest in the education of our children, especially our girls in the rural areas. As a school teacher what frightens me is the intellectually stunted growth of our children. Malnutrition, lack of a proper atmosphere or incentives for study at home, conscious or unconscious neglect of Dalit students by teachers who often term them as good for nothing are some of the causes for their backwardness in education. How they will fare in this highly competitive society is a question that confronts me every day.
6. Living in a rural area I see the inroads that globalization is making in the lives of the poor, depriving them of their small pieces of land, their traditional occupations and rights and leading them inexorably on the road of pauperization. To economically well-off people, even Dalit middle class, globalization may be a heady, liberating process. But what would be the future of our people if they become expendable in this globalization process?
7. It is not as if we are helpless bystanders who cannot change the course of events. Today we know that choices with regard to education, health, nutrition, housing, employment, political participation, social relations, etc. are very narrow and limited. In order to enlarge these choices and opportunities, Dalit women need to improve and develop their capabilities. The Church has considerable resources, material, and personnel, institutional and spiritual. The question is, who benefits from these resources and whether these can be used to enhance the capabilities of Dalits and create more opportunities for them. The credibility of the Early Church was in this that it not only shared its resources with the poor, but inculcated such spirit of sharing among its members. Can we have a social audit of the use of Church's resources?

## Conclusion

These are some of the issues we need to grapple with if we are serious about creating a better tomorrow for our people. Let me conclude by insisting once again that empowerment of Dalit women is the key to this better tomorrow. These empowered women are capable of entering into a world of reversals and contradictions which can open out to

new frames of thinking and shake oppressive systems. They can be great energizers, given the tremendous power in them. Like Mary in her little known village of Nazareth and at the foot of the Cross at Calvary, the Dalit women are challenged in grace to say “yes” to the Holy Spirit of Rebellion and Renewal and thus shape the history of the Church and Society.

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# **Points of Convergence: Dalit World and Biblical World**

**Maria Arul Raja**

The author of the article, Dr Maria Arul Raja, a leading exponent of Dalit hermeneutics, is professor of Biblical Studies at Arul Kadal, Chennai. This article is an attempt to facilitate hermeneutical dialogue between the South Asian Dalit world and West Asian Biblical world with a view to explore liberative potential in their respective linguistic, cultural and symbolic universes. The two worlds converge on the necessity of a definite option for the marginalized and on the importance of empathetically accompanying them. In both cases, the interpretative key is the overcoming of exclusion (the imposed identity) and the affirmation of inclusion (the legitimate claim of becoming co-human with other humans). The author illustrates these insights with excellent and theologically rich examples.

## **1.0 Complex Location of Dalit World**

Dalit communities are kept in close proximity to caste communities for exploitative purposes. But at the same time, they are kept apart as untouchables from the so-called mainstream and thrown to the periphery of the Indian society. This dichotomy of being wanted as well as being rejected expresses itself in the form of incorporating the sensibilities at once of tenets of major religions and elements of subaltern religious praxis.

To have some glimpses into the layers of the complex location of the Dalit world, we have to scan the interior movements beneath Dalit

‘Suffering-Assertion’ in the course of their prolonged history of struggles. While doing so, we come across the following roles and functions of Dalits:

- hapless victims of caste repression
- assertive subjects of their own destiny
- becoming-community through building-community

The above complexities of struggles and suffering, conflicts and contradictions, both within and outside, Dalits look forward to effective eradication of untouchability and the promotion of life to the full extent in every creature. Dalit struggle encounters plurality of oppression and of conflicts. This is how Dalit location which generates the Dalit pre-understanding is a ‘hybrid set of Dalit locations’.<sup>1</sup> Besides the inter-textuality<sup>2</sup> of the Dalit world, the specificity of Dalit identity is the ‘unified mix-up’ of being the victims asserting their legitimate space in becoming a community-building community; of intra-subjective and inter-subjective aspects of Dalit life; of the explicit and implicit dimensions of the conflicting Dalit consciousness.

## 2.0 Dalit Interpretative Orientation

There are various presuppositions and questions operative behind any attempt to interpret Biblical texts and stories.<sup>3</sup> Dalit hermeneutics is not merely for understanding but for transformation. It seeks to move away from the present order of caste hierarchy to a new world order of egalitarianism. As a contextualized liberative hermeneutics with the social option of promoting the political agenda of the Dalits, it seeks to enable them to emancipate themselves from the clutches of untouchability. Dalit Biblical hermeneutics, therefore, can never be

1 Cf. George Aichele & Others (eds.), *The Postmodern Bible* (London: Yale University Press, 1995) 5.

2 Dalits are quite open to any oral or written stories or discourses from religions, cultures or literature of other people to be incorporated into their native textual world. This is how the biblical stories are quite effortlessly inter-textualised along with other stories.

3 Cf. A. Maria Arul Raja, “The Dalits and the Bible”, (Guest Editorial), *VJTR* 73/4 (2009), 242.

elitist, authoritarian and individualistic but subaltern, participatory and communitarian.<sup>4</sup>

The interpretative key of the Dalit hermeneutics consists in a 'rejection' and at the same time in an affirmation. What is it that is rejected, and what is it that is affirmed? Dalit hermeneutics rejects exclusion (the imposed identity) and affirms inclusion (the identity of being co-human with other humans). This is the foundational norm of the critical principle of the Dalit hermeneutics. It does not engage itself with the pretension of scientific objectivity. It is not interested in an archaeology of meaning to be excavated from the Biblical texts set in the context of the world of antiquity. Rather it is a future-oriented enterprise.

For the emergence of Dalit consciousness and the practice of liberation it is necessary to bring together "hermeneutics, social theory, and the search for a transcendental dimension which will allow a psycho-social critique of societies and traditions which is not merely contextually internal to them."<sup>5</sup> That is why Dalit hermeneutics tends to become more socio-critical (actual conflicts) than socio-pragmatic (apparent harmony). Moreover, it is convinced that every form of dehumanisation of the other is ultimately dehumanisation of oneself.<sup>6</sup> Such a principle of interpretation is not only a contribution to Dalit liberation, but equally it is a contribution to the liberation of the entire human community.

Like in the hermeneutics of Black Theology which does not cling to the letter of the text as something immutable and non-negotiable, Dalits intuitively opt for the direction of deploying the Biblical stories

4 Cf. Pablo Richard, "Hermeneutics of Liberation: Theoretical Grounding for the Communitarian Reading of the Bible", in Fernando F. Segovia & Mary Ann Tolbert (eds.), *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998) 273.

5 Cf. Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 404.

6 Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM, 1983) p.231.

'in ways that would guarantee their relevance and poignancy.'<sup>7</sup> And consequently, the Bible is not assumed to be the deposit of 'holy' word to be defended; nor is it dissected as isolated words and passages in interpretive ventures. In other words, the Dalit world creating its own texts and Biblical texts creating its worlds are in dialogue with each other. Complex philological intricacies may not occupy the primacy of place; rather the thread-line of stories and discourses will be the central characteristic of Dalit interpretation.

By its foundational orientation, Dalit hermeneutics is free from 'excessive textualism, disparagement of both major and popular religions, and homogenization of the poor.'<sup>8</sup> To speak about 'Dalit hermeneutics' as a single category is an inadvertent denial of the identity-specific modes of interpretation of the meaning-giving stories for the empowerment of various Dalit communities across the sub-continent of India.

### 3.0 Dalit Texture and Biblical Texture

The intricacies involved in any hermeneutical engagement of Dalit location with the Biblical world are looked into in the following sections (5.0-7.0). Such discussions might pave the way for further probe into the methodological complexities in Dalit hermeneutics.

Having been kept illiterate for centuries by the dominant Brahminic ideological power, Dalits' first encounter with Christianity –the religion of the Book- would have faced the difficulty of an oral culture encountering a world of written texts. Even for the succeeding generations of Dalit Christians, the textual world is predominantly of the order of orality, especially during the moments of facing crisis. That is why, perhaps, the written texts of the Bible have not become active ideological and rhetorical field of the collective consciousness of the Dalits in India. Even before Dalits were converted to Christianity,

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7 Vincent L.Wimbush, "A Meeting of World: African Americans and the Bible", in Fernando F.Segovia & Mary Ann Tolbert (eds.), *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy* (New York: Orbis, 1998) 192.

8 Cf. R.S.Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 103.

they had their own traditions, mythology, legends, proverbs, moral teachings, customs, festivals and folk religions.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike the liberation hermeneutics, Dalit sensibilities and even Dalit Christian sensibilities do not make the Bible as “the ultimate adjudicator in matters related to morals and theological disputes.”<sup>10</sup> No single text could stake claim for monopolistic and normative grip over the Dalit preunderstanding.<sup>11</sup> Dalits would not die for upholding a text<sup>12</sup> as uniquely sacred or as an ultimate adjudicator.<sup>13</sup> Dalit hermeneutics transcends the binary notions of Christian and non-Christian, and sees religious pluralism not as an exception but as a norm. It is able to draw on a larger theological pool, and is not confined to a particular religious source. Those whose faith understands the Bible as ‘inspired’ could attempt at deploying its text for emancipating the Dalits.

The common heritage of the Dalits like popular tales, legends, folk dramas (*kuthu*), riddles, lullaby, lamentations, songs sung during collective labour, are to be placed along with the texts to be hermeneutised. This is to enable the common heritage and another text to engage each other with mutual osmosis. In this process, such texts (say the Bible or any other) cannot claim a special privilege or authority for setting norms to the native non-textual traditions of the Dalits.<sup>14</sup> The overriding criterion for the genuine Dalit hermeneutics is the ethical necessity of annihilation of discriminatory hierarchy.

9 Cf. Archie C.C.Lee, “Cross-Textual Interpretation and its Implications for Biblical Studies”, in Fernando F.Segovia & Mary Ann Tolbert (eds.), *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy* (New York: Orbis, 1998) 249.

10 R.S.Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (New York: OUP, 2002) p.117.

11 Cf. R.S.Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism*, p.118.

12 Cf. Stanley Fish, *Is there a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p.16.

13 Cf. Fernando F.Segovia & Mary Ann Tolbert (eds.), *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998), p.144.

14 Cf.M.Francis, *Why the Innocent Suffer? Job and Harichandra: Biblical and Puranic Expression* (Hydrabad: St.John Regional Seminary, 1998) p.76.

#### 4.0 Convergence between Dalit World and Biblical World

The dynamics of the interior movements, both articulate and inarticulate, of the disempowered broken hearted Dalits and the Biblical characters drawn from the stories of the Bible could be placed intertextually.<sup>15</sup> Bringing these two worlds together for dialogical purposes, the new alternatives projected by these two worlds are to be identified through their respective linguistic and symbolic world. The parameters for establishing justice here and now has to be evolved on the basis of perceptions of the sacred order and of the ethical choices in the war between the good and evil. In this paper the following table demonstrates some of the points of convergence between these two world-views, though each of them emerged from divergent locations in different times. Even cursory glimpses into this initial hermeneutical effort here, it is quite impressive to note down the crying urgency for identifying, naming and eliminating the anti-life forces in both the worlds.<sup>16</sup>

#### 5.0 Dalit Religiosity and Biblical Religiosity

When Dalit religiosity encounters the world of Biblical religiosity, the process of fusion of horizons is expected to be multi-pronged. “As is the case with most symbols, the Bible as language world is complex: it can ‘mean’ different things to different situations.”<sup>17</sup> And accordingly, the hermeneutical engagement of Dalit sensibilities with the Biblical world has to take into account the distinctive elements of the Dalit

15 Cf. A. Maria Arul Raja, Dalit Layers of Consciousness in Dialogue with Biblical World’, in James Massey & Shimeingam Shimray (eds), *Dalit- Tribal Theological Interface: Current Trends in Subaltern Theologies*, (Jorhat: TSC/ WSC & New Delhi: CDS), 196-198.

16 Cf. A. Maria Arul Raja, “Reading the First Testament from Dalit Eyes: A Preliminary Exploration”, in Imti Jamir (ed.), *Dalit Bible Commentary: Rationale, Purpose and Methodology*, (New Delhi: Centre for Dalit/ Subaltern Studies, 2006), p. 50.

17 Cf. Vincent L. Wimbush, “A Meeting of World: African Americans and the Bible”, in Fernando F. Segovia & Mary Ann Tolbert (eds.), *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy* (New York: Orbis, 1998) 197.

world. The following section makes a preliminary attempt at tracing the unique Dalit sensibilities while handling the Biblical textual world.

### 5.1 Image of God

By and large Dalits are the *anawim* of an agrarian culture whereas the Tribal people of the Bible are of nomadic culture. From an anthropological perspective, Dalit experience of divinity could be characterized as the agrarian pluralism of deities. These deities emerge from the humans as a continuum. But on the other hand, the Biblical experience of God could be construed as the nomadic monotheism from high heavens. When immanent here-and-now is the hall-mark of Dalit deities, the transcendental otherness is the overriding trait of Biblical God. The agricultural symbolism (the Earth-related world) marks Dalit worship; whereas the desert symbolism (the Heaven-related world) marks Biblical worship.

The native Dalit religiosity revolves around the down-to-earth deities. In the Dalit world and consciousness, the mother goddesses play a vital and indispensable role. On the other hand, the feminine face of God cannot be directly traced from the Biblical literature. But this aspect is brought forth by, somewhat in a round about way, elaborating on the experience of *hesed* (compassionate affirmation) and the motherly sensitivity of the fatherly Yahweh. And hence Dalits may find a regrettable lacuna while entering the Biblical world with the image of a dominant male God. The absence of symbolism of fertility attributed to Biblical God may not positively vibrate with Dalit religious sensibilities; so too the Biblical condemnation of the symbols of fertility from the Cannanite soil.

Yahweh as the deity of a large family (*kula deivam*) or of an ethnic group of people (*namma saami*) evokes positive response from Dalits. They are at home with the Biblical image of the Protector-God (*kaaval deivam*) and Powerful God with expression of wrath (the Lord of Hosts). The God of mobility (ark of Covenant) is very dear to them than the God of stability (Temple at Jerusalem as God's feet). While the former represents the on-going solidarity of God as Emmanuel (God-with-us), the latter alienates God from their daily lives; it is God domesticated by royal ideology.

### 5.2 Memory of the Murdered Martyrs and the Dead

Many Dalits who were murdered while protecting the village or defying imposed casteist norms have been eventually deified (*kolayil udita deivangal*). They are represented through the symbols of formless stones, sandy mounds, tree or metal spear or statues. Such symbols are made of easily available materials - mud, limestone, mortar, cement etc. By and large, the Dalit goddesses are portrayed in energetic and in vibrant brisk expressions of wrath, and holding rustic weapons in their hands. Tranquil postures in deep contemplation or slumber are not part of the mainstream deities of Dalits.

The story of the death of Jesus as the result of his defiant opposition to the legalistic norms of the religious and political realms makes an easy entry into the Dalit minds and hearts, and they see in Jesus the protecting god (*kaaval deivam*) in deep solidarity with their struggle against caste repression. By and large, the symbol of the crucifix seems to give them an effective impetus on a par with the spiritual energies drawn from the memory stones erected by them in their remote villages.

The respect paid to the dead is quite profound in the Dalit world. The food consumed or the materials used by the dead ones are specially offered to the dead ones on their graveyard. Interestingly, each event of remembering the dead is marked with the collective meal in memory of them. Memory and meal are the inseparables from the Dalit world. The aspect of collectively shared meal is the hallmark of the practices of animal sacrifice. And hence the image of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world and the Eucharistic meal as his body broken and his blood spilled as a ransom for many are quite evocative in the Dalit spiritual realm. The tribal (paschal) meal in memory of the great escape of the wandering Arameans fleeing from the military power of the colonialists is well cherished by Dalits. The communitarian (Eucharistic) meal in memory of Jesus killed as a martyr for having had the fellowship meal with the so-called polluted ones is also in tune with Dalit spiritual sensibilities. The Pauline admonition to the Corinthians to incorporate the weak in the Eucharistic meal is appealing to the Dalits who dream of a community without discrimination.

### 5.3 Sacrificial Meal

Dalit world views animal sacrifice to their gods as religiously significant. In the sacrificial context, “the blood itself is a symbol of fertility and multiplication that the people anticipate and cherish in their life. The sacrificial blood mediates the people with their deities. It is a covenant and a performed agreement between the people and the deities. By performing a sacrifice, the people compel the deities to pledge welfare for them.”<sup>18</sup>

Dalits are at home with the Biblical world of sacrifice of animal blood. The functions of sacrificial blood are multifarious as contracting covenant, atonement, expiation, reconciliation between parties involved. Both in the Dalit world and Biblical world, the body of the sacrificial victim divested of its blood are shared as a communitarian meal. Though burnt offerings were accepted by the Israelites as well as elite Brahminic prescriptions (*yajna* in which animals, cereals, ghee or sarees (?!) are sacrificed in fire), they are rejected by Dalits as the unproductive desecration and unpardonable wastage.

### 5.4 Culture of Prophecy

Prophetic oracles construed as the enunciation of God’s will through the medium of possessed humans is a celebrated aspect of Dalit religio-cultural world. Such oracles (*kuri sollurathu* and/or *saamiaattam*) are actively found for authoritatively addressing the situation of personal deprivation or societal need.

Prophetic defiance of the imposed order of the rulers is attuned to the Dalit culture of disobedience to caste norms. When the elite, be it from within or outside of the Jewish world, is admonished in the prophetic texts for the excesses committed against the disempowered, the Dalit self-assertion is reinvigorated. When oracles of consolations are addressed, the Dalits feel encouraged in their encounter with the inimical world of oppression and discrimination.

### 5.5 Self-emptying Servanthood

The people whom we encounter in the stories of the Biblical texts

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18 N.Muthu Mohan, “View Points: Reflections on Ban on Animal Sacrifice”, *Satya Nilayam* 5 (February 2004) 134.

were unorganized tribal labourers who were repeatedly displaced and dispersed. They were wandering through the winding path of unpredictable future and their stories were punctuated with travails as well as triumphs. The experience of being pathetically uprooted as refugees both in their own land, as well as in foreign lands were charged with memories of their past gatherings as sovereign and independent tribal communities. As disempowered homeless wanderers trying to create a legitimate space for themselves in the contexts of Exodus, Exile and recurring colonial regimes, their collective memory projected the image of the Suffering Servant. And later through the same lens, the Saviour figure of crucified Christ was seen through with the additional dimensions of self-emptying. This *kenosis* resulting in the humiliating murder of Jesus was the consequence of his voluntary participation in the lives of the stigmatized and hence marginalized people of his time.

This story-line creates in the minds and hearts of Dalits a sense of spontaneous identification with the Suffering Servant - the collectivity of the persons of the exiled people as well as the person of Jesus. This sense of solidarity with the Suffering Servant raises the Dalit zeal for exaltation from the current state of humiliation –the exile and the crucifixion - often with unbridled passion for immediate results. Discourses merely on servanthood with no reference to the possibility of exaltation are viewed with suspicion by the Dalit reader of the Bible. Discourses on mere humility and obedience with no awareness of the conflict situations are taken by Dalits only as ruthless humour.

### 5.6 *Apocalyptic Worldview*

The painful experience of the disempowered is ventilated through the apocalyptic irruption. Abounding in rich symbolism, the wounded psyche of the victims seek to subvert or reject the existing order imposed on them while continuing to project and dream of an alternative order in its place. The mega colonial or caste powers would be opposed by the powerless even within the limited political space. In other words, the apocalyptic visions are the weapons of the weak against the dominant forces. This apocalyptic arena is the fertile place for identifying the implicit consciousness with their sharp focus on their genuine concerns of the Biblical subalterns rather than their explicit

consciousness which may project certain ambiguity or confusion. One can be sure that the implicit consciousness both of the Dalits and the Biblical subalterns encounter each other in a deeply privileged way with no masks in the apocalyptic realm.<sup>19</sup>

## 6.0 Conclusion: Bible as the Servant of Dalits

Dalit interpretative attempts do not exclude the necessary historical data and the literary assumptions operative in the very production of the text. It seeks to be well-informed of the multiple literary theories and strategies in the act of addressing the contemporary Dalit readers in their respective contexts. When the Dalit world is activated by the Biblical world delineated through the text, the faith vision of the new world order is projected with new possibilities moving towards the salvific fullness liberated from the present state of enslavement. Every act of interpretation of the past text should move towards contemporary politico-historical and socio-cultural contexts.

The Biblical God's way of proceeding takes the definite option and the hard pedagogy for empathetically accompanying the marginalized with the spirit of incarnation in view of working out the universal salvation to all. Ever becoming a people of God amidst the culture of fragmentation, devastation and death, all people of good will, along with the Dalits, could take the salvific risk of creating a culture of integration, re-creation, and resurrection.

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19 Cf. N. Muthu Mohan, "View Points: Reflections on Ban on Animal Sacrifice", *Satya Nilayam* 5 (February 2004) 131.

# Together as Sisters: Hagar and Dalit Women in Exercising their Agency

A. John Baptist

The author is a Biblical Scholar teaching at Sacred Heart Seminary, Chennai. In this article, he attempts to employ liberational and subaltern biblical hermeneutics vis-à-vis the empowerment of dalit women. He bases himself on the hermeneutical principle of 'meaningfulness' rather than 'meaning'. The case of Hagar is taken for analysis. It is explicated how Hagar a slave woman, a victim of patriarchy and slavery, despite hardships, asserted herself, vindicated her rights, and thus gained her agency. Likewise, dalit women too challenge the oppressive systems of caste and male domination.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Study and interpretation of the scriptures has remained one of the prime activities of religious people and it has produced a large amount of commentaries and inspired many literary works. Is there anything still more to unearth which the scholars of yester years have not done? If we see from the *meaning* point of view it may seem a futile task to

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1 The author of this article gratefully acknowledges the positive contribution of Dr. Felix Wilfred who was the guide for his doctoral dissertation in the University of Madras. The thesis is entitled: "Character of Hagar in Gen 16: 1-16: A Narrative Study from the Perspective of Dalit Women". This article presents some sparks and glimpses of the doctoral work yet to be published. The Biblical translations in this article are my own basing on the Hebrew text of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1990.

make yet another commentary or article to find out the 'author meaning' of the text. We have enough of it. But seeing the texts of scripture from the point of *meaningfulness* makes sense, and it invites the study of the text once again. This brings us to discuss the difference between meaning and meaningfulness.

Two distinct trends emerge in the biblical exegesis and hermeneutics, one that has its focus on *meaning* and the other on *meaningfulness*. The school that insists on the meaning is predominantly Western, and it emphasizes the 'author meaning' inherent in the text. On the other hand, the representatives of the school that insists on meaningfulness consists mainly of African-American, Latin American and Asian exegetes. They concentrate on the 'reader meaning' and on the rootedness in the local realities and issues. For them, the reader is the community that engages itself in reading the text. They seek the meaningfulness of the text from the perspective of the victim and the marginalized.

It is in this sense of making a text meaningful to a particular 'reader' (read as 'reading community'), this article makes an attempt to see if the biblical figure of Hagar could help for the liberation of a reading community such as dalit women. Can Hagar story be taken as 'success story' that would inspire Dalit women in their liberative struggles?

Given the space constraint we may not be able to discuss the answer at greater length. But we may concentrate on one element where these two can meet namely, their assertion or exercise of agency.

### Why Hagar?

Hagar episode (Gen 16 and 21) addresses major issues of human life such as slavery, poverty, ethnicity, sexual and economic exploitation, surrogacy, rape, domestic violence, homelessness, motherhood, single-parenting and encountering God etc. In fact, today several victimized groups identify themselves with Hagar. The list includes mothers, people in bondage, African-American women, the exploited, women used and abused by men and women, the surrogate mother, the alien without legal recourse, the runaway youth, the unwed mother, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the homeless woman, the abandoned, abused, betrayed, and banished. It is obvious that the dalit women can be also identified with Hagar in many respects.

## The Contribution of Hagar to Literature

Literature of any particular society has two kinds of contribution to make, 1. mirroring the society<sup>2</sup>. transforming the society, setting new trends and proposing alternative values.

Israelite society, as many other societies in the world, was patriarchal. Its literature and religion reflected its thinking patterns, ideologies and value system. Some do argue that Bible as a literature of Jewish society could not escape the presence of patriarchal thinking.<sup>2</sup> The society that interpreted these texts also insisted on abiding by patriarchal thinking and opposed any divergence.

At this juncture, a question arises: Is the biblical author/s just propagating the oppressive value system of his/her time? Though the sacred author was heavily laden with patriarchal and hierarchical materials and stories, still s/he was able to bring out or indicate another worldview in the text itself. The sacred author, in some subtle ways, was able to oppose the prevalent oppressive system and propose another value system.<sup>3</sup> By conscious efforts one can 'uncover the counter-culture impulses' that are found in the Biblical texts. The observation of Exum is apt here,

Within the admittedly patriarchal context of the biblical literature, we find strong counter-currents of affirmation of women; stories that show women's courage, strength, faith, ingenuity, talents, dignity and worth. Such stories undermine patriarchal assumptions and temper patriarchal biases, often challenging the very patriarchal structures that dominate the narrative landscape.<sup>4</sup>

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2 Even the presence of women in the Bible is not equal to that of men. In Gen and Ex 1-2 women appear more frequently and take active part if not equal part in the salvation history. But in Ex 3-40, Book of Leviticus and 1-2 Kings, their presence is not significant and they do not play any active role.

3 Of course, because of the social compulsions he/she could not do it publicly. cf. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Studies in Bible and Feminist Criticism*, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2006, 167.

4 J. Cheryl Exum, " 'Mother in Israel': A Familiar Figure Reconsidered" in Letty M. Russell, (ed.) *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985, 74. According to Osiek, "Freed from their own historical and cultural

So Hagar story can be seen as one that proposes a counter value system against the dominant system of her time. As mentioned above, I attempt here to see such counter current especially in her self-assertion and agency.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Agency and Assertion of Hagar in Gen 16**

When picturing and describing the subaltern men and women, the authors, whether they hail from subaltern communities or not, almost always describe subaltern as someone suffering, and to be pitied, and they appeal to the 'good will' of the dominant to do something about the 'sad situation'. But Dalit women do not expect such a treatment. They have their agency to work out, and they are able to navigate their liberation whatever may be the hard realities around them. Hagar sets a model to this effect in three respects: in her revolt (Gen 16:4), flight (Gen 16:6), and in answering the messenger of God (Gen 16:8). Let me briefly explain these three aspects and connect them to the assertions and agency of Dalit women.

#### **1. Hagar's Revolt in Gen 16:4**

Hagar who was silent in first three verses becomes active in this verse and unfolds her inner feelings.<sup>6</sup> Her very first act in the episode is startling and surprising both to the reader and Sarai.

##### ***1.1. Interiorization of Hagar***

The episode began with internalization of Sarai about her barrenness (v.2), a social disgrace. Now the narrator speaks of the interiorization

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contexts, however, the texts inspire a message of human liberation through the working of justice which today addresses us authoritatively within our own contemporary awareness of oppression" Carolyn Osiek, "The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives" in Adela Yarbro Collins, (ed.) *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985, 103.

5 For other aspects of Hagar converging with the liberative efforts of Dalit women and functioning as success story or a model cf. My doctoral thesis (footnote 1).

6 The violent actions of Jael (Judg 4:17-24) come as a surprise both to Sisera and to the reader because the story is under-narrated and did not give the point of view of Jael until she began to act. Cf. Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 71.

of Hagar. Hagar for the first time, begins to interiorize the existing phenomena: that she has conceived and thereby becomes a mother. As a result there will be an heir (primogeniture) to Abram in and through her. Prior to her pregnancy, she never thought of herself as a person. But the child growing in her womb enkindled the awareness of her new status and opened her eyes. Thereby she began to ponder upon the new life of her baby and herself. And this very awareness aroused certain questions, whether the child would in turn also be a slave or enjoy a free life in the future. Further, it evoked her vision of equality and mutuality with Sarai. Thus Hagar could say, "It (the new status) was not hatred but a reordering of the relationship... but my mistress remained within the old structure. My mistress wanted to return to the superior status."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the relationship between the mistress and maid required renegotiation and reordering for which Sarai will not be ready.<sup>8</sup>

This interiorization brought about a sense of self-worth, which was dormant in her. As Weems affirms, "The child growing inside her was proof that she was more than a slave: *she was a woman.*"<sup>9</sup> In other words, Hagar feels superior because she is pregnant, a 'mother' and fully 'woman'. So her 'motherhood' changes her social status. Sarai, on the other hand, remained barren for very many years.<sup>10</sup> Hagar realized that she is capable of something, which her mistress was not. While Sarai saw her incapacity, defect and what she could not do, Hagar saw her capacity, possibility and what she could do. While Hagar's identity as wife and as mother initiated a new reordering of relationship between the two, Sarai wants to continue and perpetuate the old order of distance, discrimination and exploitation. So now, the

7 Sangwha, Kim, "The Story from Hagar's Perspective – Genesis 16:1-16; 21:9-21", *In God's Image*, 12 no.4 (1993), 24.

8 Cf. Renit J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, San Diego: Lura Media, 1988, 5.

9 Weems, *Sister Away*, 5-6, emphasis added.

10 The feeling of superiority of Hagar is understandable against the background of 'the symbolic meaning and the importance of fertility' in the Ancient Near East culture.

two orders clash. Thus Hagar exercises her agency.<sup>11</sup> Making use of her opportunity and capability as mother, Hagar created a new capital and she transforms it into a liberative potential. Motherhood which remained in the history as some physiological event is made into a liberating experience, exploiting its sociological potential.

### 1.2. *On the Decision of Hagar to Flee (Gen 16:6)*

As Bar-Efrat says, “A great deal can be learned about people from the decisions they make. Because it involves choosing between alternatives, decisions reveal a person’s scale of value, showing us the outcome of the struggles between desires, emotions and spiritual values, whether ethical, religious or social.”<sup>12</sup> In this regard, the decision of Hagar to flee from the house of Abram is of great importance and it shows the scale of values of Hagar and her agency. According to Elsa Tamez:

She [Hagar] was not interested in trying to win Sarah’s goodwill by suffering the abuses in silence. *Hagar preferred to die in the desert.* There were only two alternatives left to Hagar: subject herself to the humiliations inflicted on her or die in the desert. She chose the second.”<sup>13</sup>

She takes command of her own life and claims her own exodus.

Thus, scholars interpret the flight of Hagar as *liberative and as an emancipatory action*, which involves ‘will to be liberated’, accepting the danger that come on the way and taking risk. Her *will for freedom* is expressed in her flight from the ‘legal’ oppression, into the desert exposing her to all dangers it involves. She preferred the unknown danger of wilderness, as free woman, to the ‘comfortable

11 Ska suggests that the word ‘her mistress’ (HT’r>biG> [GübürTäh]) is selected with care. (Cf. J. L. Ska, *Abraham Cycle: Synchronic and Diachronic Analysis*, Unpublished class notes, Rome: PIB, 1996, 89.) The reaction of Hagar is more to the ‘mistress’, who represents the social order, than to the person or woman named Sarai. It is a social conflict, between a mistress and a maid-servant.

12 Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, Dorothea Shefer-Vanson (Trans.), Decatur: Almond Press, 1989, 81.

13 Elsa Tamez, “The Woman who Complicated the History of Salvation” *Cross Currents* 36 no. 2 (1986), 133. Emphasis added.

life' in her 'mistress' house. Thus she becomes the first female in the Bible to liberate herself from an oppressive power structure.

### 1.3. Answer of Hagar to the Messenger of God

The messenger asks two questions: "From where have you come? And where are you going?" (Gen 16:8). She answers saying, "I am fleeing from the presence of Sarai my mistress." There are different explanations tried by authors<sup>14</sup> but that of Williams brings out the assertion of Hagar. For her, while the messenger was concerned about the past and the destination of Hagar, she spoke only about her present, namely, she is fleeing.<sup>15</sup> Janzen suggests that in one statement there is answer for both the questions i.e., "from the presence (face) of Sarai, my mistress" answers the first, while "I am fleeing" answers the second.<sup>16</sup> Her flight therefore is both the origin and the destiny?<sup>17</sup>

In her answer, Hagar presents herself as fugitive and asserts her claims. She *registers* her arguments, her protest and her perception of the situation, despite the social convention of being named or labeled as 'maidservant of Sarai' (Gen 16:8). Thus, Hagar, for the first time, becomes or acts as an *answering subject*. Now Hagar is free and able to articulate her opinion, which was denied and prohibited in her master's house.

The above discussion makes it clear that Hagar story can be set or seen as story of assertion and agency that could inspire Dalit women

14 For a detailed discussion of these explanations cf. my thesis.

15 Cf. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, New York: Orbis Books, 1993, 20-21; R.D. Weis, "Stained Glass Window, Kaleidoscope or Catalyst: The Implications of Difference in Readings of the Hagar and Sarah Stories" *JSOTSS* (1996), 264.

16 Cf. J. Gerald Janzen, "Hagar in Paul's Eyes and in the Eyes of Yahweh (Genesis 16): A Study in Horizons" *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 13 no.1 (June, 1991), 8.

17 May be the following words of the messenger (asking her to return; promise of descendants and indication of the future of the son) may mean that he indicates to Hagar that flight cannot be the end or destiny. There is something beyond it. Flight can be only a temporary relief or escape but it does not solve the problem. What now Hagar lacks is strategy. The messenger seems to provide that.

who suffer under patriarchy and caste oppression. I however do not suggest blind copying or repeating all the modes of assertions or agency, but they have to be adapted to situation of Dalit women. Dalit women could be inspired by Hagar episode, but they need to evolve their own mode of assertion and agency. The Dalit women, individually and collectively address the social evils such as patriarchy and caste system in two ways: the overt and the covert forms of assertion; in other words, the revolt model and the resistance model.

## 2. Assertions and Agency of Dalit Women

The awakened oppressed masses take to demonstrations, protests, and organize revolts against the oppressions or deprivations that are thrust on them. This is done by direct actions against the customary codes of conduct, with the hope to bring about change in the dominant group. Kancha Ilaiah narrates one such event of overt assertion of Dalit women under the leadership of Varginamma, which after great struggle ended in success.<sup>18</sup> However, overt forms of assertion will not meet with success always. Moreover, they need many conducive factors to be successful. The greatest danger in overt form of assertion or in creating crisis is that the subordinates themselves will be in crisis. When the dalit women defy the accepted codes of the dominant groups, or when they attempt reordering the social systems, by showing some signs of assertion, the oppressive system comes heavily on them and inflicts greater violence to establish itself and to show that the power is still with it.<sup>19</sup> At times, the dependency of Dalits on the dominant castes makes it impossible to take up overt forms of resistance.

18 Cf. Kancha Ilaiah, "Of land and Dalit Women", in Anupama Rao, (ed.) *Gender & Caste* (Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism, vol.1), New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2003, 331-332.

19 The dominant ideology would attempt to control, co-opt, or suppress the attempts or desires for justice. The discontented and oppressed would find new, creative, subtle and indirect ways of expressing and keeping alive the idea of justice. cf. Steven M. Parish, *Hierarchy and its Discontents: Culture and the Politics of Consciousness in Caste Society*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, 226; James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

The above reasons compel subalterns, the Dalit women in particular, to take to covert forms of assertions or resistance. This does not mean that they are mute and suffer the oppression, but that they look for an opportune time to act, and in the meantime, they show their resistance in subtle forms. Scott lists some of the covert forms as "... foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering,<sup>20</sup> feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage and so forth."<sup>21</sup> The other forms are desertion, ridicule, truculence, irony, petty acts of noncompliance, etc. Exploiting the resources of the dominant groups, bargaining for some space, and negotiating some powers within the oppressive structures are some other forms of covert resistance.<sup>22</sup> Such forms of resistance today, according to Felix Wilfred, are the hope of tomorrow.<sup>23</sup>

20 Viramma narrates from her life: "But I tell you, Sinnamma, that I won't be satisfied with what the Reddiar gives me for all that work. When I get to the field, I fill a little jar with big, fat peanuts which are white as milk when they're cooked. I hide the jar under a peanut plant. At the end of the day, I quietly pick up what I've hidden, put the leaves I've picked for the oxen on top of the jar and get going." (Viramma, Jociane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine, *Viramma: Life of a Dalit*, Will Hobson (Trans.), New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2000, 247.) Viramma's justification for the occult compensation: "Even if he sees me, he acts as if he hasn't noticed and he doesn't say anything. But aren't we there to take care of the fields, to be bitten by snakes and lizards, to oversee the harvests, because we're his own serfs?" (Viramma, Racine, *Viramma*, 247.)

21 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, 29, 34. Also cf. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*.

22 Cf. Gail Omvedt, "The Downtrodden among the Downtrodden: An Interview with a Dalit Agricultural Labourer" in Anupama Rao (ed.), *Gender & Caste*, (Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism, vol.1), New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2003, 322; Fernando Franco, Jyotsna Macwan, and Suguna Ramanathan (eds.) *The Silken Swing: The Cultural Universe of Dalit Women*, Calcutta: Stree, 2000, 5.

23 Cf. Felix Wilfred, *The Sling of Utopia*, Delhi: ISPCK, 2005, 6.

## Conclusion

The above discussion involving Hagar and Dalit women as sisters in their struggle for liberation explained how they exercised their agency. Thus the study of Scriptures from the point of view of the reader searching for meaningfulness of the text is more advantageous for the liberative struggles of the subaltern, in our case the dalit women. This is worth attempting in the field of Biblical interpretation.

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# What Can ‘Upper Caste’ Christians Learn from Dalit Christians?

**Felix Wilfred**

In this article, the author reverses the traditional equations of a condescending Church dominated by the upper castes trying to do a lot of “good things” for the oppressed Dalit Christians. He maintains that it is the Dalits who are making significant contribution to the Church. With this, he proposes all those things the so-called upper caste Christians could learn from Dalit Christians to strengthen their faith, and how an open Church could contribute to the society more through the agency of the Dalits.

“Pizza arrives in 30 minutes; the ambulance doesn’t”, notes a write-up in the latest issue of a weekly.<sup>1</sup> I think this statement captures the India of today with its lopsided values that can be characterized penny-wise and pound-foolish. The glitz and glamour of the consumer world is propelled fast, whereas the most important things in life are relegated to the background and are made to move at snail pace. We are in a country in which, under globalization and liberal capitalism the interest of the vast majority of the people are sacrificed on the altar of a handful of politicians and capitalist entrepreneurs who share among themselves the public resources as their booty. The recent dramatic exposures of corruptions in the country have made it plain.

What is said about the country and our Indian society applies to a large extent also to the Indian Church, where things are not very different. The decisions taken by the Church leadership are often controlled and manipulated by the so called 'upper castes'<sup>2</sup> who are driven by considerations of power, position and security. They are also the ones who have their hands on the resources in the Church. The Church is very fast in coming out with statements and condemnations on things that often border on trivialities; but slow when it comes to what is important and crucial, as justice to the victims. Events in the recent past in the Church would illustrate this.

The issue of Dalits in the Church is one which unfortunately receives quite a marginal attention, whereas this should be, along with the cause of the tribals, a prime concern of the Indian Church. Why this has not happened is due to the intransigent attitude and actions of upper castes - spanning a history of several centuries - who have held those from the Dalit community as secondary citizens in the Church with no space of their own, except what the upper castes allot to them. Longstanding oppression of the Dalits has come to the fore, thanks to the awakening among Dalit Christians who are today struggling against a hostile leadership, clergy and upper caste Christians. If not by conviction, at least moved by pragmatic considerations of having to come to terms with the resistance of Dalits, we note some changes taking place. But these are a far cry from the radical transformation required. For this to happen, there needs to be some change in the mindset of the upper castes. This could come about through many ways and channels. This article reflects on how this change could take place, if the upper castes, instead of being reactionary to the Dalit Christian movement, set out to think in new terms of what they could learn from Dalit Christians.

<sup>2</sup> The expression "upper castes" used in this article does not, obviously mean that these castes are superior to others. This is simply a claim on the part of castes concerned, and not a reality. Today the expression "dominant caste" is being used in sociological and anthropological literature. However, in the context of reflection in this article which challenges the claims of dominant castes, I felt that the use of the expression "upper caste" could be more effective.

## Learning to Receive from Dalit Christians

Dalit Christians give more than what they receive. This is a simple truth. But sadly what they give to the Church is not acknowledged and affirmed. Their contribution to the Church and its reform are such that the upper caste Christians have a lot to learn from them. Dalits are not simply objects to be liberated by others. They themselves have resources which need to be continuously activated. Dalits do not have the economic power as most of them suffer from poverty, misery and malnutrition, etc. Nor do they have political power, as any attempt of their coming together is broken, But they do have a lot of cultural resources which can serve beyond their own liberation. These resources serve also to liberate the upper castes and classes, and bring them back to the heart of the Gospel message. Having suffered and continuing to suffer discrimination, they can teach the Christian community what brotherhood and sisterhood really is; they can teach what justice is. They know the real value of these fundamental Christian realities. They understand what inclusion is and know the bitter experience of exclusion.<sup>3</sup> This experiential knowledge of the Dalits can be a tremendous source of help to transform Christian communities into a real communion of equals.

### Dalit Audacity of Faith - a Resource for Reform in the Church

Dalit Christians challenge the Church to involve itself for the cause of the poor and thus put into practice the Good News to the poor. By this reform which springs from the Dalits, the entire Church stands to benefit. It brings about a necessary purification in the Church. Their claim for representation and participation has the potential to make the Church a community of true pluralism with diverse gifts and charisms. When the Church does not turn to Dalits it will not be a Church of the poor; and as long as the Church does not use the resources and charisms of the Dalits, it will be a poor Church. Any community grows through the contribution of all its members, their gifts and charisms. Through many covert and overt practices, Dalits are excluded in the

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3 Cf. Felix Wilfred, *Asian Public Theology*, ISPCK, Delhi, 2010.

Church in different arena. There is a tacit message that it is the upper caste Christians who are the stalwarts of the Church and the Dalits are secondary citizens within the Church community. They appear to be a dispensable lot in the Church.

History tells us that Saint Bernard of Clairvaux who was a relentless champion of reform in the Church – both among the leaders and the faithful - wrote to Pope Eugene III these words:

When the pope, clad in silk, covered with gold and jewels, rides out on his white horse, escorted by soldiers and servants, he looks more like Constantine's successor than St Peter's.<sup>4</sup>

These are words of audacity – audacity of Indeed of faith and fidelity to the Gospel, to Jesus' message of Good News to the poor. Many times the words of Dalits may have this ring of challenge to the Church, its triumphalism. They reflect the reforms to be effected in the Church. The audacity of their faith to challenge the power and pomp in the Church and its misdirected zeal could have a great effect for renewing the Indian Church.

Upper caste clergy and laity take offence at the forthrightness of the Dalits who are not afraid of saying that the emperor is naked. They do not have the habit of covering up but speak the unadorned plain truth. And truth could hurt. The Church-leaders, clergy and the upper caste Christians, instead of being troubled by *what* the Dalits say and do, need to ask the deeper question: *Why* they say so; or why they do these things. If this happens, then the way is open for reform and change in the Church.

### **Relativity of the Social Order**

Whereas for the upper castes, the order is given, a pre-ordained destiny, for the Dalits, it is not absolute. The basic relativization of the social order is something very important for the future of the society. The stories and myths of the Dalits are such that their situation is not something preordained but appear to be resulting from some historical accidents. This makes their life and thought closer to Christianity rather

4 As quoted in Yves Congar, *Power and Poverty in the Church*, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1964.

than the Christians of the upper caste whose thought and practice resemble more the Brahminical worldview. I mean to say, the upper caste Christians, unfortunately, are caught up in the world of fatalism that underpins the caste-ideology. According to this, some people are born high and others are born low; some are born to rule, and others are meant to serve. This ideology of fatalism is deeply embedded in the minds of the upper castes and is transmitted from generation to generation. As a result, in their behaviour pattern they feel a natural superiority over the Dalits.

Here we may recall the two positions of Moffat and Deliege. Whereas for Moffat, Dalits reproduce the Brahminical order which explains the division among them, for Deliege, far from conforming to the Brahminical order, Dalits question this order by describing their own plight as human creation and not as something immutable and inevitable destiny.<sup>5</sup> Dalit Christians carry this impulse with them and direct it to the Church, to the upper caste Christians by refusing to conform to a social order which is created by selfish people and justified in the name of God.

### Dalits Challenge Divisions in the Church

Most often Dalits are blamed for causing division in the Church. Are they really the ones causing division? Is it not a typical case of blaming the victims? Dalits in fact contribute to the unity of the Church which is constantly broken and fragmented by the selfishness and machination of the upper castes often in collusion with Church-leaders, the clergy and the religious. Up until the last two decades, the upper castes, their clergy and religious, when confronted with discrimination in the Church, were vociferous in denying any such thing. This is an illusion, to say the least, if not crass arrogance and self-righteousness. We need a humble Church that admits honestly the wounds within. The wounds of divisions were festering within the Church too long, and the Dalits have only exposed it; they did not create it. It is the

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5 Cf. M. Moffat, *An Untouchable Community in South India: Structure and Consensus*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1979; Robert Deliege, *The Untouchables of India*, Berg, Oxford, 1999.

upper castes who by their numerous practices of exclusion fostered it, often with the blessings of the clergy of their own castes. The exposure of caste-division in the Church may hit the pride and arrogance of upper caste Christians and Church-leaders.

### **Dalits – Partners in the Making of the Church**

The arrogance of the upper castes and Church-leaders vis-a-vis the Dalits is due among other things, a tacit claim of doing many things in favour of the Dalits, expecting in return their gratitude and obeisance. The Dalits are viewed as beneficiaries of what the Church dolls out. But the point is that Church is not primarily a developmental organization; it is a communion. It is supposed to be a witness to the equality of all sons and daughters of God. The Baptismal equality calls for the removal of all walls of separation, and renunciation of caste or ethnic discrimination. The Church happens only when there is practice of true communion. Where it is, the community grows through dialogue. As it is, the upper castes do not consider Dalits as equal partners in dialogue within the Church. By their claim to be equal partners for what pertains the common good of the community – the parish, diocese, and region etc. – Dalits teach the grammar of dialogue to the upper castes. There is no dialogue in a master-slave relationship. Acceptance of the other as equal partner is the condition for every genuine dialogue. This is a fundamental and legitimate claim of the Dalits.

### **Dalit Christian Faith - Challenge to Tradition**

The very fact that upper castes claim superiority and privileges in the name of caste is a sign of their succumbing to an ideology that is diametrically opposed to the Christian life and teachings of the Gospel. The Syrian Christians, for example, view the *Cheramars* and other Dalit Christians<sup>6</sup> as "new Christians" ("Puthu Khristianikal")<sup>7</sup>. This

6 The "Cheramars" were referred to as "Pulayas" in South Travancore and North Kerala. The simplistic claims, often made, that there is no Dalit Christians in Kerala blatantly ignores the discrimination these groups of Dalits are going through and their struggles for dignity in the Church.

7 It is a historical fact that the Syrian Christian remained a caste-inscribed group till about the 16<sup>th</sup> century, refusing to admit those considered lower castes and Dalits to their fold. Hence the label 'new Christians'. These 'new Christians'

labeling could be a way to set aside the “new” God brings to the Church through them by challenging the moral sclerosis of the upper castes and their inordinate attachment to tradition. They challenge too the resulting insensitivity to the burning issues of the times. Tradition is not the ultimate criterion. It was Tertullian who said that Jesus said of himself that “he was the truth and not tradition”.<sup>8</sup> Any tradition should be subject to truth. The mere fact that something is old does not qualify itself to take the place of truth. If we have our faith right, we must believe that God continues to speak to us through what may appear as weak, as small or as negligible. If the upper caste Christians are open, they will listen to God’s word in the cries and lamentations of the Dalits in the Church.

One of the important contributions Dalits are making both to the society and to the Church is to challenge their traditions. History tells us that the beginning of modernity coincides with the challenge to tradition and the authority and power vested with it. Dalits do have their practices and customs that do not amount to the ideology of tradition which builds walls of exclusion and is preoccupied with guarding of orthodoxy. Preservation of the old and tenacious attachment to it give power to the dominant sections in any society – including the Church.

Whereas the upper castes claim covertly and overtly, that their faith is stronger compared to the Dalits – the “new Christians” – the truth is that the faith of the upper caste is weak, as they are not able to rise up to the Gospel ideal of equality and practice it. The very discrimination they show to the Dalit Christians is at the same time a testimony of their weak faith. They need to be strengthened by the

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continue to be discriminated against. Pentecostalism appeared as an avenue to the Dalits to overcome the discrimination they suffered. But the unfortunate fact is that the claims of caste-superiority of the Syrian Christians has contributed to divide the Pentecostal Churches too! Because of this discrimination, the Dalits were forced to form their own Dalit Pentecostal Churches. See V.V. Thomas, *Dalit Pentecostalism*, Asian Trading Corporation, Bangalore, 2008.

8 Tertullian: “*Dominus noster Christus veritatem se, non consuetudinem cognominavit*”, *De Vir.vel. 1,1.*

faith of the Dalits who, in the spirit of the Gospel, renounce to any distinction on the basis of caste, race or ethnicity, in order to embrace and practice the baptismal equality of all the faithful. Such a faith has a stronger and firmer foundation than the faith of the upper castes, whose faith in their caste identity appear to be much stronger than their faith in the Gospel.

Moreover, no group of Christians suffer because of their Christian faith as the Dalits do, something the upper caste Christians ignore or do not want to accept. The consequences of Christian identity are manifold. The most obvious is the denial of the rights and reservation enjoyed by Dalits of other communities. Even more crucial is the fact that the Dalit Christians are not legally protected as other Dalits. For, the Prevention of the Atrocities Act of 1989 does not apply to Christian Dalits, which means they are vulnerable to the threats of the upper castes both in the society and in the Church. But Dalit Christians heroically hold on to faith with fidelity and great dedication. And yet, the upper castes see in them “infants” in faith, having converted to Christianity in more recent times, whereas they pride themselves of having authentic faith.<sup>9</sup> But how their “firm” and “authentic” faith is to be reconciled with caste discrimination and exclusion of people is not clear.

### **The Thirst for Justice**

The Gospel speaks of “thirst for justice”, and those who have this thirst (not those who have thirst for money, power, career and position) are said to be blessed (cf. Mt 5:...). In these times when the poor in the country – and the poor in the world at large – are experiencing callous neglect of their plight and the agenda of justice is submerged in the sea of consumerism, the Dalits keep alive the agenda of Jesus and his

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<sup>9</sup> We need to critically question the assumption that the higher castes were converted first and then at a later period, the Dalits. If we take a region like Tamilnadu, the fact is that right from the beginning both, the so-called high castes and Dalits turned to Christianity. There were Dalit Christians from the beginning of mission. Only from nineteenth century, due to various socio-political circumstances, there was mass conversion among the Dalits. This makes questionable historically the appellation of Dalit Christians as “new Christians”.

vision of justice. By claiming dignity and respect for themselves, they in a way represent the poor and the victims. They challenge the Church to have at the heart of its life, its mission, its institutions, the cause of the victims. They stand up to the Church, its leaders, clergy and the upper castes when justice is denied, and when blatant violation of human rights are met with stony silence.

### Contribution to Reorient Inculturation

One of the significant contribution the Dalits have made to the Church is to make it rethink its orientation to inculturation. In the early post-Conciliar period, the initiatives taken by the institutional Church in inculturation were in the lines of Brahminical Hinduism. The Dalits played an important *corrective role* to the official efforts of the Church to inculturate. They drew attention to the fact that India is culturally diverse and it may not relate to one particular cultural stream in its efforts of inculturation.<sup>10</sup> They brought to the fore another stream of religiosity, that of the subalterns and challenged the zealots of Brahminical inculturation in the Church. The question of inculturation was only the tip of an iceberg. This was an occasion to tackle more basic issues. It challenged the uncritical espousal of high caste customs and practices.

### “Pastoral Prudence” – A Ploy for Inaction?

How does the Church respond to issues of injustice to Dalit Christians? While Dalit people want to see the Church acting and involving itself in cases of blatant violation of human rights and negation of equality to them, what they get in return is silence, read prudence.

Prudence is a great virtue – a cardinal virtue, indeed. It is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It is a grace we receive to do our moral duty and it also indicates the concrete means we need to take to accomplish this duty. There is no intrinsic connection of prudence and silence. A person acts prudently when he or she has interpreted the concrete situation and has discerned the way of God. In short, *duty, action and discernment* characterize the virtue of prudence. There is

10 Cf. S.M. Michael, “Dalit Encounter with Christianity: Change and Continuity”, in Rowena Robinson – Joseph Marianus Kujur, *Margins of Faith. Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India*, SAGE Publications, Delhi, 2010, pp. 51-74.

often very little resemblance of it when the upper caste Church leaders invoke "pastoral prudence". Like secrecy, pastoral prudence serves many Church-leaders to cover up their lethargy and inaction and the failure to respond to their moral duty.

### **Needed a New Catechism tied to a New Social Pedagogy**

Catechism is certainly important. More than one hundred bishops will gather together in the near future to discuss and debate about it. Who could dispute their good intentions and the efforts that are taken? But then, how much efforts are taken for a social pedagogy in the Church that would instill in the minds of the upper caste children that caste is something opposed to Christianity? What ways and strategies are sought beyond generalities on the evil of casteism to detoxicate the venom of caste from the minds of the young ones and nurture a new generation in the Church who will turn the issue of caste into a matter of yester years?

Preoccupied with the transmission of the purity of doctrine, do our catechisms take into account the impurity of high caste parents who infuse the venom of caste into the children? The children, through the influence of the parents and through a process of socialization begin to learn attitudes and behaviour patterns that make them consider themselves as superior and treat the Dalits as inferior.

The morality preached from the pulpit by Church leaders and clergy is couched in terms of equality and brotherhood, but only to be denied in day-to-day life with innumerable acts of exclusion. As in the society, there is a public denial of caste among the upper caste Christians and clergy in the Church. Such being the case, mere teachings of Christian doctrine of equality may not bring out any effect, unless it is followed by practical strategies aimed at change. Brahminical ideology holds that everyone is equal since all of us partake in divinity – a sublime doctrine indeed. It is characteristic of Brahminical ideology to believe that a problem is solved when it is solved in theory. Have we not so much of that in the Church? Consequently, those who profess the sublime truth of equality of all, have no difficulty to maintain caste ideology and practice the worst forms of discrimination in the Church. Christian catechism should not follow this path. The validity of a catechism is to be seen in its concrete effects in history. It should

begin with public admission of the evil of caste in the Church, in its administrative units, bodies, institutions, their admission and appointment policies, etc.<sup>11</sup> As a Church of sinners, we need a new catechism that will have inherent strategies built into it for change in the deeper streams in the Church that are highly caste-infected, and get away from an illusion of equality at the surface level.

The upper castes and their clergy need to be schooled in a new catechism of praxis – they need to unlearn many things connected with their caste-arrogance, and submit themselves to a new pedagogy. There should be ways and means by which they learn their faith by doing. This doing would involve a pedagogy that would lead them to undo things they have been doing, to renounce what they have been falsely claiming all along, and to grow in the freedom of God's children.

### Conclusion

The gift which the Dalits are making to the Church is free and noble because they do not expect any reward in return. The gift they are making is by way of purifying the Church, transforming it, and bringing it back to the path of Jesus of Nazareth. On the other hand, the Church-leaders, clergy, religious and upper caste Christians are accustomed to think whatever they do to the Dalits is a gift, and they expect gratitude and obeisance in return, which annuls the very nature of gift.

What the upper castes need to do is to come down, like Zacheus, from the tree of their caste to where Jesus is – down on the dusty soil amidst those considered low, impure, and outcasts. The upper caste can come down from the heights of their arrogance through a process of real conversion and attitude of true Christian humility that they have sinned, and indeed too long against the poor of God – the Dalits. If they are converted they will be eager students in the school of Dalits to learn the ways of God and the path of Jesus. That will be a new dawn for the Church too.

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11 The representation of Bishops to the state authorities to include Dalit Christians in the scheduled caste to derive benefit like other Dalits was a clear admission that Dalit Christians are discriminated against.

# **Create Opportunities for Dalit Christians**

*An Interview*

***Archbishop A.M. Chinnappa (AMC) of Madras-Mylapore gave an exclusive interview for Jeevadhara on the issue of Dalit Christians. He was interviewed by Felix Wilfred***

***As an Archbishop from Dalit community, what is your experience of brother bishops in their attitude and involvement for the cause of Dalits?***

On the whole, the bishops of the national conference CBCI seem to welcome the emergence of Dalits and are interested in their cause. I have also known several bishops who did not understand the issue. When I tell them about it, they get interested in it. When I speak about untouchability and discrimination, they tell me that nobody told them about these things and that now they begin to understand. So you see, there is sincerity on the part of the bishops for the cause of Dalits. But then, involvement would come only with greater knowledge of the question. I take it my duty to talk in the conferences as well as privately to the bishops about Dalit issues.

***Dalit issue is a burning national issue today. Don't you think that this ignorance of the bishops about Dalits in the Church is culpable, and itself a sign of lack of leadership? Should not a leader know the actual problems? If they are pleading ignorance of a national problem, what kind of leaders do they claim to be?***

It is not that all the bishops are ignorant of Dalit issues. The bishops from Syrian tradition, for example, do not seem to understand the issue of discrimination. They claim high caste Brahminic origins and the relationship of Christians of this group to Dalits has been one of caste superiority. Dalits are those who do mostly agricultural labour in their fields and do the work of coolies. The condition of the Dalits has been like slavery. The high caste Christians accept this as the natural condition and refuse to recognize any human dignity to them nor equality. It is comfortable to have such a docile and submissive workforce for their trouble-free life. To have a subjugated people who will do menial work for them is to their advantage. How then would these Christians be interested in the total liberation of the Dalits, when this would go against their own interests? On the other hand, I would like to add, to be fair, that Syrian Christians of Kerala, unlike in Tamilnadu, Andhra and other states, do not discriminate Dalit Christians in Church-services and burial grounds. Moreover, due to the influence and contribution of CBCI commission for SC/ST/BC and through the influence of secular movements of Dalit liberation, there is a change taking place in the condition of Dalit Christians.

*You spoke of bishops and 'upper caste' Christians. Now, could you say something on priests and religious, and their attitude and involvement in the Dalit cause?*

The priests and religious absorb from the environment the deep prejudice against the Dalits. They have been indoctrinated in innumerable ways and they absorb the caste spirit. But the irony is that many priests and religious, instead of being instruments of liberation of Dalits seem to use God and religion to justify the subjugation of the Dalit people. There is an unexpressed assumption among the upper caste priests and religious that they come from above, from God, whereas the impure Dalits come from the earth. Some of them behave even in a feudal manner towards the Dalits and do not hesitate to use even abusive language against them.

But I wish also to highlight the dedication of those very few exceptional priests and religious who are genuinely interested in Dalits and put their heart and soul to empower them.

*What do you think about the situation of Dalit women, and Dalit religious women in the Church?*

Women are generally seen as less capable and emotionally unstable to take up difficult leadership positions. This is a very wrong view. Dalit women suffer even more prejudices and they are oppressed in the Dalit community itself due to pervasive patriarchy that affects all classes and castes. Due to this they are considered second class citizens and less capable human beings. For the upper castes, Dalit women are a non-entity. They have no dignity or voice. Church should then specially work for the empowerment of Dalit women and for their agency, for their rights. This should happen also in the case of Dalit women religious. The religious orders should take special efforts to promote and offer opportunities of leadership for Dalit women religious and their growth. They should be entrusted with responsibility at all levels. When opportunities are created for Dalit women, they will come out of the loss of self-confidence they suffer due to longstanding oppression, and they will become a great force for the growth of the community and of the Church. Unfortunately, today Dalit religious women are subtly sidelined from positions of leadership and responsibility in many religious congregations.

*Do you think there has been any significant change in the situation of the Dalit Christians?*

I think in recent decades, the Society of Jesus especially in Tamilnadu, has made a significant contribution to the cause of Dalit Christians. It all started with the 32<sup>nd</sup> General Congregation of the Society, in which they sought to relate faith and justice closely. This gave new impulse to the Dalit priests within the Society of Jesus to critically view within their own order the existing discrimination and prejudices. Some Dalit Jesuits like Fr Antony Raj and Fr Anand. Fr Jesumarian and others raised their voices against the discriminatory practices within the Society of Jesus to which they belonged, and its casteist policies and practices. It then quickly spread to the Christian community and its practices. The discrimination and the injustices done to the Dalit Christians got exposed. Bishops were challenged. Protests,

fasting and many such activities brought to the centre-stage the Dalit issue. There were demands for equal treatment, for justice, for participation at various levels of life in the Church, especially in leadership. All this laid the foundation for the Dalit Christian awakening.

*Historically don't you think that the Jesuits themselves were the cause for this discrimination of Dalit Christians, because they had one mission strategy for the high caste and another one for the low castes and both the groups were kept separate. Don't you think that the seeds of Dalit Christian discrimination were sown by such a practice? Would you consider the new initiatives of this religious society, basically, as a way to undo their own harms of the past?*

Precisely this point I discussed in my doctoral thesis written under your guidance at the University of Madras, you will remember. I said in my thesis that they accepted caste as part of the social reality, concerned as they were with the salvation of souls. Challenging of caste did not appear to them as part of faith, but was viewed as prejudicial to the success of mission. They could do the mission work without bothering about existing discrimination which was accepted as a normal social reality. Most missionaries followed the same ways, including the Paris Foreign Mission (MEP). It was a time of ambiguity and the official Church was not also very clear about its position at that time. It was an evangelization without challenging the culture, tradition and social reality that was opposed to the Gospel. The new initiatives make up for this by drawing from the Gospel in its egalitarian message and prophetic spirit.

*There are conflicts between upper caste Christians and Dalit Christians everywhere in the country. What is the reason for these conflicts? How could these conflicts be resolved?*

Caste poisons the mind and conditions the practices of the so-called upper caste people. They have internalized the caste identity so much that it is very difficult to remove it. As a result, they consider the Dalit people as not deserving dignity, recognition as human persons, education, and other opportunities. Now, when Dalits through their hard work

and availing the opportunities offered by the state and other non-governmental organizations, get educated, find employment and improve their economic conditions, this is deeply resented by upper caste Christians. All the more so, when through new self-consciousness of their dignity, Dalits claim their basic rights to move freely, to participate actively in the Church-activities, to get buried without discrimination, and so on. The root of conflicts lies in the narrow and intransigent attitudes and practices of upper castes.

As a bishop my solution would be to call for a total conversion. Is there really conversion among the upper caste Christians? If they do not accept equality and communion, Christian life itself becomes a fake. I doubt that anyone can claim to be Christians because they believe that they are good people who support the Church, while refusing to accept Dalits as equals and as brothers and sisters. Are not all of them baptized in the same water, and in the name of the same Jesus?

*Many church leaders, priests, religious and upper caste Christians think that change will take place slowly. There is already a lot of change regarding Dalits, they say. Such being the case, they find the attitude and actions of Dalits as aggressive and belligerent. What do you say about it?*

This sort of statement comes from caste people. They do not want to give up what they have. They seem to believe as though the change in Dalit situation will take place through a miracle! The crux of the problem is the refusal of caste people to give up their privileges and to share the resources and opportunities. A change in the unjust situation is something urgent and needs to be answered without postponing. If there are many murders taking place in a city, or a country is affected by AIDS or plague, the state does not sit back and say that slowly the murders will disappear; one day there will not be any AIDS or plague. They act on war-footing to prevent murder, so that injustices and violations of the right to life do not happen. If such is the case in the secular world, how come that in the Church one adopts the attitude that things will change slowly, when it is the question of intervening in

the injustices and discrimination perpetrated against the Dalits? Such a position reveals how little conscious the caste people are about the seriousness of the Dalit issue. It does not seem to really touch them. Jesus said, that where our treasure is, there is our heart. If the caste people realize and feel with the Dalit people, they will not delay to respond to their plight and demands. Pope Benedict XVI has set a good example in the case of pedophilia by swiftly taking appropriate measures.

*To what extent are the Dalits made participants in the life of the Church and its various bodies? Are you satisfied with the present situation in this regard?*

There are different organizations that work for the eradication of untouchability, especially in the southern states. Dalit people are given now opportunities for education in colleges, in appointments, etc. There is also a realization that Dalit people should participate in the various bodies and organizations in the Church and share in the parish council, school staff council, in the pastoral council of the diocese, and so on. These are positive developments and this process must be now accelerated. What stands in the way of greater participation of the Dalits is the attitude of caste people who often think as if the parish, the diocese, the institutions of the Church were their ancestral property to which they can hold on, keeping the Dalits out. Again here is a matter of real conversion and of adopting the spirit of Jesus.

*Tamilnadu is one of the States where the Dalit situation is very acute. As Chairman of the Tamilnadu Bishops Council, what are your plans for the cause of Dalits in general and Dalit Christians in particular?*

This is an important question, and you make me think. There is already an SC/ST/BC Commission in place. At a certain point, the Bishops' Council during their meeting in Vellore was confronted with the agitation of Dalit Christian leaders. The regional bishops came out with a ten point programme to promote Dalit Christians. This was evaluated in 2004 and an eight point programme was endorsed by the bishops. One of the demands was that Dalit should be represented in

leadership positions. There came about, for example, a few appointments of bishops from Dalit community, like myself. There is also increase of vocations from among the Dalits both to priesthood and to religious life. Efforts have been taken to recruit in Christian institution, Dalits proportionate to their strength. These are positive developments. As the chairman, I will try to encourage and promote the laudable initiatives that are already underway.

*Many upper caste Christians think that Dalits are “new Christians” and they even think that Dalits are in the Church for material benefits (“rice Christians”). What do you think of these views? Do you think these views really represent the faith of Dalit Christians?*

First of all, historically it may not be correct to hold that high caste people embraced Christianity first, and Dalits entered only later. This is a historical distortion that helps to keep the Dalits out of power and belittle their faith. The truth is that the caste people and Dalits were converted at the same time. But at a later period – in nineteenth and early twentieth century – there were mass conversions and a lot more Dalit people embraced Christian faith. Similarly, when there were famines, the missionaries assisted all – caste people and Dalits - and they were all given rice, wheat, etc. How could then one single out Dalit Christians as if they became Christians allured by material helps symbolized by wheat or rice? The faith of the Dalits is deep enough, and it is unfortunate that their faith is misrepresented by such labeling.

*What contribution could Dalit Christians make to the Church and its growth?*

Dalit people have suffered humiliation, inhuman treatment, and inequality. Now the nation and the Church give them opportunity to express their God-given talents, it should be used for the growth of the community. Being a people freed from the clutches of slavery and oppression, they will contribute to the practice of justice, to a deeper understanding of brotherhood and sisterhood. They will contribute to

creation of genuine national community, diocesan and parish community. In this way, they will be fulfilling something which the other people are not able to accomplish because of their deep attachment to caste.

*According to you, what kind of support could Vatican give to the cause of Dalits?*

I am happy that Vatican has seen the problem of the Dalits and understands it. Its support is appreciable. But I feel it could be more helpful. For example, it depends on Vatican to ensure that Dalits are represented in the hierarchy and other important leadership positions in the Church and even in Vatican curia. But the present status does not really measure up to the expectations. There are extremely capable persons among the Dalits. Their representation in leadership position will be not only symbolic but also very effective. They will be able to bring to the local Church as well as to the universal Church new talents and charisms and thus help the body of the Church really grow.